

Transcendence and Adolescence

I have found that relaxation exercises which include attending to breath and muscle relaxation can help students to become alert and focused, as well as foster a more harmonious learning environment. I have also worked with visualization or guided imagery and see the benefits for many children of awakening the imagination, satisfying curiosity about "altered states of consciousness" in healthy ways and gaining new insights about their goals and gifts"

Rachael Kessler: The Soul of Education, p131, 2000

The journey from childhood to adulthood is bumpy, confusing and frightening. There are many changes happening on all levels - mind, body and spirit. Statistics show that, today, we have more teenagers struggling from mental illness, poverty, homelessness, violence, teenage pregnancy, crime and alcohol and drug abuse.

Drug use and abuse has increased considerably over the last ten years. Frighteningly so! I question experts about what is behind this increase. The usual answers are:

- It is normal teenage experimentation;
- Drugs are now much more available and accessible to young people;
- There are more emotional challenges for today's teenagers;
- It is a way to avoid pain, usually emotional;
- Peer pressure - driven by the desire to belong;
- It is a way to de-stress and relax;
- Legal drugs, including tobacco, alcohol and pharmaceutical drugs have increased in use and social acceptance;
- Teenagers are looking for peak experiences and find drugs a great way to have them;
- It is a way to escape unhappiness and loneliness;
- It builds a false sense of confidence and wellbeing.

Through working with many teenagers who use illicit drugs to escape the pressures of adolescence, the way was opened for me to consider the need to give our children and teenagers the opportunity to experience moments of heightened pleasure and wellbeing without drugs of any kind. The need for transcendence is part of every human being's journey to awareness and maturity. There are many ways parents and teachers can help find this heightened sense.

The Athletic High

In Australia we are 'pretty sporting mad'. Many visitors who were in Sydney for the 2000 Olympic Games were amazed at the passion we express for sport in any shape or form.

I feel sure that we are so enthusiastic because sport elevates us to

- a pleasurable state that we enjoy.
- This state can be experienced without alcohol and drugs

I am a 'seldom TV watcher' and so have limited exposure to the many magic moments in sporting history. Sport has huge potential in a healthy development of the reality of drug-free highs. It is particularly important for boys to be able to enjoy physical activities and sport to this degree. Schools and communities can help by being as supportive as possible in the continued development of sport and athletic pursuits. It is a drug prevention tool.

Outdoor pursuits

I again mention the importance of families encouraging the growth of a healthy relationship with Nature, the 'Outside World'. Being a farmer's daughter, I had a childhood where I was able to fully embrace the natural world. I felt its potential to be a place of comfort and enlightenment. 'Country kids' are often more aware of the passing seasons, the importance of working with Mother Nature and of the cycle of birth, life and death. As children, my siblings and I were helping to deliver lambs and pups by the age of six. It was very exciting to help bring a lamb into the world. Birth is a very transcendent experience - a natural high.

I understand how the alienation of city life can contribute to addictive behaviour, depressive thoughts or a sense of disconnection from people and things that matter.

The importance of pursuits outside the four walls of home and the classroom has been known for a long time. The creator of 'Outward Bound', a national adventure organization, identified the transformational powers of life in nature back in the post war years. He created opportunities for experiences that removed people from the comfort zones of familiar environments and developed challenges that really stretched them. There is still room for schools to focus on at least one major physical challenge as part of the upper school program, made readily available to both tertiary and non-tertiary bound students.

Adventures on the tall ship the 'Leeuwin' are a great example of physical challenge. Being part of a team that is responsible for the safety of everyone on board the ship is certainly character building. The challenge of scaling the masts to set the sails is one of the special tests of personal courage available while onboard ship. Close supervision is provided, by people with expertise and a passion to help young people grow and develop, and allows this experience. It is an excellent form of character building as well as a positive way to experience drug-free highs just as school camps can be..

My sons are all keen surfers. The ocean has provided them with some of their finest and worst moments over their last ten years. It will probably continue to do so for many years to come. There is something very special about the

ocean and the soul of those who choose and love to be part of it. Encourage your children or your students to find this connection and to nurture it.

The 'buzz' and thrill that comes from the physical mastery of challenges like rock climbing, abseiling, high ropes courses and the like is a great way for teenagers to taste a place beyond the normal. It is a form of healthy risk taking. We all grow when we challenge our comfort zones, whether physical or emotional. The ocean seems to be especially helpful for teenage boys to nurture their desires to seek thrills, and it is good for their souls. It is sad that the treat of litigation has "tamed" down many school camps and expeditions as it will take away this type of transcendent experiences for our young.

Artistic and musical expression

The 'Arts' have been a source of wonder and awe for centuries. Great musicians and singers have stirred our hearts and drawn our spirits out to soar to elevated places for eons. It is no different now.

It is not, however, just the great talents of the world that can do this. At a musical eisteddfod you can feel the same awe and wonder at the giftedness of children and adults as they play or sing their way through their items. Similarly, at the Rock Eisteddfod where schools spend months creating unique school productions that involve both dance and a sense of theatre the amount of exalted energy present at the heats of these events is something to be experienced. Everyone wins, even if an individual school does not take home the award.

Children and teenagers taking part in school plays and musicals also experience a heightened feeling of 'being'. A dedicated talented teacher in one of our local primary schools puts on a school musical most years and the growth in confidence and the sheer exhilaration experienced by the students is amazing. To succeed to that point, there are many hours of preparation, rehearsal and a working together of the group for a shared goal. Incredibly important life skills are involved and the exalted high on performance nights is a great example of a drug-free lift.

Rachael Kessler in her excellent book the 'Soul of Education' talks of 'the urge for transcendence' that young people seek. She includes the following quote:

Adolescents of all ages need ecstatic experience to become adult, and if the culture will not provide it they will seek it in any case, often in ways which do them harm

B. Neville

Sometimes the 'urge for transcendence' translates into accidents, near death experiences, drugs that alter states of awareness, and alcohol abuse. Kessler explored the fascination of death in the young and identified that some suicides were not the result of despair and hopelessness but rather a "quest for a life-affirming experience of transcendence". This quest can be fed by poets, song writers and people of hero status who have died, like Michael Hutchence and Kurt Cobain.

Rachael Kessler in her excellent book the 'Soul of Education' explains the term 'to transcend' in a variety of things:

- to be lost or immersed in a play, dance or creative process;
- "flashes of intensity" against a 'dull background' of ordinary days;
- to rise above, or pass beyond, a human limit;
- reaching beyond ordinary life and consciousness;
- opening to the domain of spirit.

We can all benefit by remembering how impressionable and naïve our teenagers are and prepare them as positively as possible to be discerning. It is important to continue to make room in our schools for the arts, for school performances and bands. This means also art for creative pursuits and for pleasure; creative writing, drawing and music to encourage individual expression in a non-assessable way.

Without these experiences teenagers may go looking for highs from somewhere else.

Deep connectedness and the power of truth

In homes and classrooms that are safe, and where everyone is respected, there is an amazing potential to experience deep connectedness through the sharing of honest dialogue. I have experienced this many times in classrooms. Deep honest respectful sharing can create a deep sense of belonging and of being valued simply by the act of deep sharing.

Nurturing the inner world

We all have an inner and an outer world. Both are with us at all times in some form or another. There are many terms and words used to describe what is meant by our 'inner world', and these can be misleading. Simply put, we all have the ability to shift our focus of attention from what is happening outside of us to what's happening inside. We can change our connection with what is around us with our intent, as when we daydream, and we create an 'altered state' from our normal waking way of behaviour.

I believe firmly that we need to bring 'relaxation' and silent time to think into our lives. This time allows answers to come into our minds and creative imagination opportunities into our days, and into our classrooms. It is best from an early age and followed through to the final years of schooling, and beyond. Besides being an excellent way to teach effective stress management for later life, I believe that relaxation and silent time nurtures healthy development of an inner world where children and teenagers can alter their own states of awareness, without needing drugs or alcohol.

Disenchanted, alienated teenagers have lost all those aspects of the human spirit. Schools place less and less importance on singing, dancing, listening to

and telling stories, and silence in the pursuit of academic excellence. Many families and communities also place less and less value on them. I believe passionately in the importance of these 'soul' aspects for the healthy growth and development of our X future generations

Deep relaxation

Teenage years are a time when our fledgling adults are spreading their wings and sampling life in its many forms and fashions. Teenagers often live with a strong inner critic and the voice of judgement within their heads as they compare themselves to others and life's expectations of them. Being able to reach a deep place of inner calmness and stillness can help them feel better about themselves. Deep relaxation quietens the inner voices. Very deep relaxation combined with deep breathing can create an altered state of awareness that feels 'out of the ordinary'.

Deep relaxation is a cheap, gentle form of transcending the normal mundane life of study, school and complex relationships. If you could see the faces of a whole group of students or a room of teenagers AFTER twenty minute of guided relaxation you would know it is the truth.

The funny thing about relaxation in the classroom is that it also usually helps students become more alert and to concentrate on their tasks. A more positive calmer learning environment is created. Using breath and muscle relaxation exercises brings more oxygen into the body and that is important for the whole body, not just the lungs and circulatory system.

Our teenagers are living in a very different world to the one we grew up in. I firmly believe that now they need their parents during adolescence more than ever before. Drug affected or addicted teenagers can come from any family, any cultural group and any community. I have some very special friends who are loving caring parents and yet who have a daughter who struggled with a heroin addiction. Don't be complacent or judgemental; be well informed, involved with your kids and especially be vigilant.

By providing naturally transcendent opportunities for children and teenagers to experience "highs" we may be helping to reduce the other unhealthy, risky pursuits of the teenage years. Surely its worth a go.

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