

PASSION AND PAINS IN PARENTING ADOLESCENTS

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by Jacqueline Langley, Ph.D.



Adolescence is defined, first, by physical maturational growth that corresponds with puberty. It is a time when our child's little body transforms from a state of relative rest to an explosion of raging hormones and secondary sexual

characteristics. It is marked by psychological changes such as giving up childhood images of beloved parents – and by exploding cognitive growth allowing for complex tasks.

The first sub-phase of adolescence begins roughly between nine and eleven years of age. Our once organized, calm, and predictable child becomes hungrier, messier, greedier,

intrusive, and self-centered. This is all very normal. The hormonal changes taking place result in much

more intense sexual and aggressive feelings. These feelings and energy surges are scary for our children and for ourselves as parents as well. Our children realize they feel different, but often don't have the language, and certainly not the understanding, to express

this. They just know they feel bad, confused, and overwhelmed, and they have no idea why. They cannot calm themselves when excited or angry. When these feelings turn inward, they cannot stimulate themselves when depressed. They are aware of their changing status in life; they are no longer little children and must face growing up.

Prior to this stage of life, our children were borrowing a fuller identity from us. Although capable of many things, they had not yet consolidated their own independent identities nor fully developed their own moral values and independent thoughts and fantasies. To compensate, they borrowed these values by idealizing us and fusing their internal image of themselves with their internal image of us. When the hormonal surges kick in, they become more aware of themselves as separate

individuals and begin loosening these internal idealized ties to

form their own identities. This results in excitement, joy, anxiety, fear, emptiness, loneliness,

and depression that continues to one degree or another throughout life. Adolescence is the mourning for childhood as they knew it. This mourning is essential, because without it there is no motivation to form independent and unique identities.

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■ PERSPECTIVES ■

When our children feel deeply and put these feelings into action, it will inevitably stir similar feelings in us as parents. We will begin to relive our own adolescence. There is a downside because this process may re-open old wounds from our past, especially if we did not fully mourn our own childhood or learn to accept its challenges and disadvantages. This can be painful. Many of us as parents may attempt to repress these feelings by over-controlling our adolescents who may then become depressed, neglect their schoolwork, or be left to find the answers through their peers. We do not want this.

Instead we must embrace the mourning by allowing our children to regress and wallow in the comforts of home. Reminisce aloud about their babyhood and childhood, remind them of their humorous charm and liveliness and how it still lives inside them. Share experiences of our own childhood—both

the good and bad. If the mourning is not embraced, our children may feel they must

shut the door on their childhood and not let it continue to live inside them. Or they may stunt their budding independence. This would be tragic.

Our children's more outward expressions of anger and sexuality inevitably stir us as parents. Our children may make us feel angry and sexual. It is our job to know what to do with this. As parents we should embrace this as a real opportunity to revive these feelings inside of us, to gain better mastery and open up our own inner lives. Yoga, psychotherapy, meditation, exercise within reason, and indulging in the arts all give us opportunities to accomplish this. Once we have embraced this process, our children will not only be less difficult to face

but enlivening.

Then, when our children talk to us directly about these feelings, when they regress and run back home for comfort, it is not as hard to take. However, when they act on these feelings outside the comfort of home, it is a different matter. This is when the art of bullying is born. Suddenly we are hearing stories about children ganging up and physically harming other children; or more typically with girls, verbally tearing each other up behind their backs. This is heart wrenching but still, unfortunately, within normal limits. It is the result of their difficulty containing their own sexual and aggressive feelings without the internal controls to do so.

Bullying has many meanings. It can be a way of displacing a child's new and frightening feelings onto another and behaving as if the other child is the bad or undesirable one. If they

can convince themselves that other children are the bad ones, they create an illusion of restoring their own self-esteem.

Bullying can also be identification with the

aggressor. If the tough guy seems stronger and more confident, becoming or joining a bully creates an illusion of strength.

If our child is the bully, it is very hard but we must open our eyes to it, and take action. All children are capable of these behaviors. They are in normal limits. Recent studies indicate that, in the end, the bully is harmed much more than the victim, especially if the bullying is not an isolated incident but a pattern of behavior that is crippling to self-esteem. First, we must empathize and let our little bully know we are there to help. Second, we must help our child own their behavior and the internal world that fuels it. This means as parents we must admit to it ourselves and not fall into the trap of thinking

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our child is perfect. Third, we must provide consequences that match the offense and help our child to think about the behavior and its origins.

If our child is the victim, we can provide comfort and help to understand that unfortunately children at this stage of life can be cruel. It is not our child's fault. Next, we must help our child to facilitate assertive behaviors by giving suggestions on how to stand up to a bully. If the bullying escalates and our child is in physical or emotional danger, we must call the bully's parents and/or school authorities.

The next sub-phase of early adolescence occurs roughly between the ages of eleven and thirteen. Sexual and aggressive feelings are at an all time high and will be magnified externally and more dramatically. Secondary sexual characteristics become more evident. Internally children may feel self conscious and disorientated in trying to grasp the dramatic alterations in their bodily selves. Up until now, they were flat chested as girls and had a straight waist. It is dizzying and confusing when they attempt to shift their internal image to match the reflections in the mirror. Boys' wolf whistles may be a little flattering on one level but frightening and bewildering on another. Many girls in our culture will insist on wearing baggy clothes to protect themselves from these dangers while others will emulate Lindsay Lohan. This is when our young women are in danger of being frighteningly misunderstood.

There are differences between male and female sexual development. From very early on little boys experience their masculine identity, more clearly than little girls. This is because their sexual genitalia are external. Boys can touch, play with, and form an intimate relationship with their penis and testicles, which gives them great pleasure and definition. They can then more easily internalize a clear and defined image of their sexuality from very early in life. However,

because their genitalia are external, they feel more vulnerable to attack.

Little girls, however, do not have the advantage of external genitals. Their genitalia are hidden for the most part and deeply internal. Instead of a clear definition of their sexuality, they may internalize an empty space or a vague sensation of being female based on sexual feelings. Their open display of their sexuality can have a multitude of meanings. (1) It can compensate for the empty space they may feel inside by reassuring themselves about what is growing from without. (2) It can be a means to define themselves by identifying with a popular group that also displays their sexuality. (3) It can be to attract the attention of boys to counteract their emptiness and/or more clearly define their feminine identity. Some sexual contact is within normal limits but at an extreme level can be dangerous at this vulnerable age. So, parents who only have boys, please do not jump to conclusions about the motives of our girls. The motives of our girls do not have nefarious origins.

Girls and boys alike at this stage are going to be more flirtatious with the opposite-sexed parent and openly competitive with the same-sexed parent. This is all normal if it does not cause harm. Celebrate their bodies aloud and laugh with them and your spouse about their antics. If their behaviors cause harm to themselves or to the family's functioning, we must admit it to ourselves and openly set limits on our adolescent's behavior. It works best when parents present a united front.

During this sub-phase we can do many things to help our children internalize and integrate their newly formed bodies and feelings. First, if our children's self-consciousness is not too overwhelming, we can notice the changes aloud by complementing them. Second, we can talk candidly about experiences and feelings we faced when our bodies and feelings changed.

This can be a powerful tension breaker and relief for our children to know that his competent parents not only survived the changes but grew from them. Third, we can purchase clothes that flatter our son's newly formed body and celebrate our little girl's menses. As a society we need more celebratory rituals to acknowledge the exciting rites of passage into manhood and womanhood. Our children need as many positives as we can give them to counteract the sometimes frightening and alienating experiences.

Adolescence proper begins at fourteen. Here, our young adults must face the final stages of separating their internal images of themselves from their internalized image of us and choose a partner of the opposite sex who reflects this independence. This is truly an arduous task. The final loosening of ties exacerbates the deep mourning and creates feelings of emptiness, alienation, depression, anger, loss, agony, and loneliness. The dawning of abstract thinking helps them to see and look upon their internal and external world with intoxicating awareness. Although this can be extremely exciting, opening the joys of new worlds never imagined, this can also be frightening because they are now vividly aware of how vulnerable they are—they do not yet have the whole self and internal controls they need to face the challenges of an over-stimulating, intensely competitive, and sometimes chillingly un-empathetic culture. This vulnerability results in intensely driven experiences needed to compensate for the transient vulnerability. First, they may vacillate between passively retreating to us to be comforted and

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then actively breaking away from us to seek new internal images. This vacillation is clearly evident in our adolescent's behavior and may be defended against through devaluing us and rebellious acting out. Driving too fast, experimenting with alcohol and/or drugs, and sexual experimentation are all examples of behaviors, if kept in moderation, are within normal limits. Again, I must go back to the nature of the vulnerability—it is so important. The

chronic incongruence between their actual selves (sense of their own characteristics and competence) and their ideal self (internal self-representation associated with an optimal ability to deal with demands) is called narcissistic vulnerability. This state is reminiscent of one-year-old toddlers who discover the terror of their separateness precisely when they have acquired the advanced skill of the locomotive motility called walking. This basically means that our child feels more prone to embarrassment, shyness, shame, a deeper concern about self-worth, and more self-doubt than at any other stage of life. Both our toddler and our adolescent attempt to bridge the gap between the actual and ideal selves through the use of two means of restitution.

First, there is omnipotence. Omnipotence is simply the adolescent's denial of a weakened state accompanied by a tendency to over-value self-worth. This grandiosity provides the strength needed to practice new ways of coping. Practice leads to the actual acquisition of new coping skills, bridging the gap between actual and ideal selves. For example, our child, who may already enjoy status in a popular group, may not feel popular or valued. To compensate, our adolescent may act popular by wearing “popular”

clothes, practicing the language of the popular group, and even being a leader in learning new dances, etc. With this practice he or she will actually learn new skills that will be very self-esteem enhancing.

The second restitutive phenomenon is the use of what psychoanalysts call transitional phenomena. Just as our toddler will latch onto a blanket or stuffed animal to derive comfort when separating from us, our adolescent must achieve new ways of enhancing self-esteem independent of parents through attachment to peer groups and new adults, such as teachers or coaches. While borrowing an external sense of esteem, our adolescent can then practice new roles and identities through borrowing them and learning them in context of safe peer and adult relationships. Once our adolescents acquire the roles that seem to fit and are satisfying, they internalize them to experience a heightened identity and heightened independence. This once again bridges the gap between the ideal self and the actual self.

The strength derived from these experiences provides our child with a heightened capacity to fully mourn the loss of early internal parents, as well as the loss of childhood. When our child can properly grieve, they can re-channel their energies into life enhancing activity and choose an independent partner who they can love and appreciate.

How can we help? First, we must celebrate their newfound lives in non-intrusive ways. We must create appropriate limits and try hard not to over-react angrily to our child's acting out. This could end tragically if the overreactions are a pattern and lead to repression, robbing our child of the energy to grow and create. It could

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result in more serious and dangerous forms of acting out and/or depression. We must celebrate our adolescent's growing sexuality and independence aloud whenever possible. We can enthusiastically teach them by expressing genuine interest in their creative ways of dress, music, taste in literature, and general passion for living. If we cannot adequately support our child through depressions, we must seek help. Psychotherapy for this age group, which is hungry for new adult role models, can be extremely helpful. Remember, adolescence is synonymous with crisis. It is a normally abnormal stage of life. It is normal to seek help and advice.

Adolescence is exciting; adolescence is frightening, adolescence is sad; adolescence is wildly alive with passion. Adolescence should be celebrated with all of the excitement and joy one can generate.

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