



Why Teens Needs Attachment-Focused Parenting Too

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Due to growing research and awareness of child development and effective parenting, this generation of parents are increasingly leaning toward attachment-focused parenting. This approach places primary focus on the development of a positive parent-child relationship as the basis for supporting healthy regulation of emotion and behavior. When a 6-year-old returns home from a busy day in the classroom and immediately has a meltdown because he can't untie his shoelaces, parents can appreciate this behavior for what it is: a little guy struggling to manage feelings and exhaustion after working so hard to navigate the challenges of his day. Instead of sending him to his room and or giving him a scolding, an attachment-focused approach could include wrapping this little one in big hug, gently noting "Oh boy, you had a big day today, you're having a tough time right now, huh?", and sitting together until the intense feelings start to subside.

However, something often switches in parents' approaches when their child reaches the teen years. Expectations increase and tolerance for intense emotions goes down. Emotional dysregulation may look similar with yelling, stomping, and slamming of doors; or it may look quite different, with sullen expressions, rude comments, or passive-aggressive refusal to follow direction. Underneath the surface, however, the same mechanism is at play: difficulty in managing emotions and lacking the resources, at the moment, to cope with the present stressors.

Instead of the warm hug (which a teen would likely rebuff at this point), parents might respond with, "How many times do I have to ask you to take the garbage out before you'll finally listen!?", "You are not to speak to me that tone!", or "Keep this up, and you'll lose your phone for a week!"

Why do parents move away from a warm, empathic approach during this particularly important time in development? Some of the following thoughts may be at play:

1. "I know my teen is (or should be) capable of doing this, they are just being lazy and need to be motivated."
2. "This kind of behavior/attitude is not going to work in the real-world and they need to be prepared for the consequences."
3. "I know what I was like as a teen, I made some really stupid decisions, and I want to protect my teen from making the same mistakes that I did."

Research on adolescent brain development shows us that factors such as emotional dysregulation, impulsive behavior, and poor decision-making are normal and expectable qualities of the teen years (see "Brainstorm" by Dr. Daniel Siegel for great information on teen brains and behaviors). We know from this research that development is not linear, and that just because a teen is amazingly responsible on one particular day or in one environment does not mean that they won't continue to struggle at other times. They will make poor decisions (because we all did and all do), they will struggle with their mood and emotions (because we all did and all do), and they will be tasked with picking up and moving forward (because we all did and all do).

Lecturing, punishing, and yelling is not going speed up brain development, and in fact, can damage the parent-teen relationship, making it harder for parents to effectively fulfill their most important tasks: connecting, supporting, and teaching. Teens will learn more and move more smoothly toward the responsible, kind, and well-adjusted adults we want them to be when their struggles are met, not with attempts to control their behavior, but with compassion and support. While your “warm hug” might look different for your 14-year old (you may offer a drive to Starbucks, a walk around the block together, or even just a sincere “I know it’s tough, I can help you out with this”), teens need the same understanding and empathic approach as the little ones. We all do.

References:

Siegel, D. (2013). *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*. Tarcher Perigee Publisher.



Dr. Erin van der Pauw is a Registered Psychologist and holds a doctorate in Clinical Psychology from William James College (Boston, MA) and a Bachelor's degree in psychology from Yale University. She brings to The Wishing Star over a decade of working with young people struggling with a range of behavioural and emotional challenges,

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Her areas of clinical interest include: behaviour challenges, emotional regulation, anxiety, depression, self-esteem/self-image, and trauma. Erin utilizes a variety of therapeutic approaches, informed by empirical data and tailored to meet the needs and style of her clients. At the heart of her practice is her belief that all individuals require safety, respect, and encouragement and support from others to reach their potential.

She is known for her gentle and compassionate interpersonal style, and she values the privilege of working alongside parents and young people as they come to know their strengths and grow in their ability to navigate their world.