

What Teens Need from Adults

By Barrington H. Brennen, September 25, 2008

A few weeks ago I wrote about raising the age of maturity from 18 to 20 because, according to research, adulthood does not really begin until in the early 20s. I quoted Dr. Elizabeth Sowell, a member of a research team at the University of California, Los Angeles. She said that "the evidence now is strong that the brain does not cease to mature until the early 20s in those relevant parts that govern impulsivity, judgment, planning for the future, foresight of consequences, and other characteristics that make people morally culpable."

What does this mean? Should we then excuse teens' violent behavior? Am I suggesting that society accepts violence as normal behavior among teenagers? Certainly not! What is imperative here is that effective parenting skills be utilized to help adolescents through the turbulent teenage years.

Teenagers need parents, even if they do not think so. Note carefully that teenagers become what they were taught earlier in life. There is a truth to the saying, "Don't blame it on the children."

WHAT DO TEENS NEED FROM ADULTS?

Here is a non-exhaustive list of things teenagers need from adults (parents or those who work with teenagers) as stated by Paul Kivel, one of the United States leaders in dealing with violence and abuse in families. Teenagers need adults who will:

1. listen.
2. model strength, openness, respect, trust, and cooperation.
3. provide good information to assist them in life's decisions.
4. respect their intelligence at all times.
5. value teens' fears and problems as genuine.
6. not try to force change on anyone.
7. prevent rudeness, judging (especially judgments about appearance), lecturing, attitude of disrespect, or the attitude that one is "incorrect" or blameworthy for what she/he believes at the present time.
8. recognize that small steps and activities are important and need to be encouraged.
9. welcome and celebrate making mistakes and be willing to risk and learn.
10. listen, listen, praise, praise, respect, respect.

THEY NEED OUR TOUCH

Perhaps one of the greatest needs of teenagers is a daily, loving touch, from their parents or significant others. It is the best medication to build the teenage-family immune system against the evils of society. Parents, when was the last time you touched your teenager in a loving, caring way? Whether it is a hug, pat on the shoulder, squeeze, embrace, teenagers are craving for a loving touch, even if they appear to be cold or reluctant to do so. Most teenagers who are cold towards a touch

are that way because parents did not continue their touching through the early growth years.

Virginia Satir, the late American psychotherapist, gives a simple formula to the furtherance of the human race: "Four hugs a day for survival, eight hugs for maintenance, twelve for growth." I recently read an article: "Can a hug make teenagers less terrible?" by British writers, Richard Sadler and Martyn McLaughlin, about teenage violence in Britain. It stated that "leading sensory researchers said . . . we are losing touch with such simple maxims, and warned that many of the nation's worst social problems – such as teenage violence and anti-social behavior – are probably linked to our famous British reserve and a lack of tactility between parents and children. We can surely make the same observations in The Bahamas and the Caribbean. Our teenagers need our loving touch. They are starving for a touch. It's real!

The article also states: "We are beginning to learn that touch starvation could have dire consequences later in life, as well as adverse effects on health and mental well being."

In another article, "A Hug a Day Keeps the Blues Away," Peter Spalton, an outstanding body language expert, shares why hugging is so important. He states: ". . . hugging is a wonderful tonic. It makes you feel energized and gives you an emotional boost . . . especially at this busy time of year when many people are feeling the pressure. In fact, the medical evidence is that a hug even makes your body produce more oxytocin, which is the 'feel good' hormone. Research in America found that one 20-second hug a day makes a big difference between how happy and relaxed we are. This is why people in a healthy relationship are happier and feel less stressed."

CAUTION! WHERE TO START?

Yes! I am very serious about this. I believe that if there was much more purposeful, loving touching in our society, we will have less violence. We need more touching. We need more hugs. How do parents start touching in a loving way their teenagers if they have not done so in years? Be aware parents, if you start today trying to embrace your son or daughter and you haven't done it in years, you might be pushed away. They might think you are weird. Take your time and be gentle. Take them out on a date first. Do not touch them. The next time start with a gentle pat on the shoulder and a positive comment. "I am proud of you." "You look nice in that color." When you embrace your teenager for the first time, start from the side with one of your hands pulling him or her to your side. This is less intimidating. Frontal embraces may not go well at first. You may get pushed away.

Before you embrace, let your rebellious teenager first feel the touch of loving words on their hearts. It might take weeks to touching. Be patient. As you begin to blend loving words with loving touches, you will be amazed of the response and change in behavior. You will discover that your cold, accusatory methods will diminish and be replaced with firm, consistent advice, guidance, and care. Let's stop the violence in our community. Start giving a loving touch today. Our teenagers need that. **Barrington Brennen is a marriage and family therapist. Send your questions or comments to question@soencouragement.org, or call 242 323 8722, or visit the website www.soencouragement.org, or write P.O. Box N0896, Nassau, The Bahamas.**