

Coming to Their Emotional Rescue

*Middle-school years can be tough.
But, by fostering a child's 'Emotional Intelligence,' parents can make it all easier.*



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By Maurice J. Elias, PhD

Who can forget, as much as we would like to, the middle-school years and the parental lectures? Although we were on the receiving end as teenagers, most of us have since been the authors of such sermons with our own kids. When we get upset, we tend to revert to what is most familiar, which often is what our parents used on us. It's not helped when, economically, socially, professionally and personally, we walk around with more stress than we can handle. Ditto for our kids, even though we do want to enjoy them and not add to their stress.

Parents can aspire to build their relationships with their teenagers in a way that might make it almost civilized, occasionally enjoyable and, yes, fulfilling. It involves parenting with "Emotional Intelligence," a term to describe an aptitude that develops from a genuine desire to nurture children and recognize that this can only happen if we engage them positively and constructively. To help parents create a safe harbor for teens, Steven Tobias, Brian Friedlander and I wrote a new book, *Raising Emotionally Intelligent Teenagers: Parenting with Love, Laughter, and Limits* (Harmony Books).

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The Challenge of the Teen Years

The early teen years herald an episode of great challenge for parents, a time when young lives can get derailed. Their troubles are not coincidental: Events of puberty combine with cognitive and social-development changes to make middle-school transition complex. Rates of cigarette, alcohol and drug use that peak in high school have their start in the middle school. The same is true with school disaffection. Too many girls, in particular, suffer damage to self-esteem and lose interest and confidence in math- and science-related subject areas and careers, largely because of social pressures and classroom dynamics. Some kids who always did well until middle school have to cope with their first "lack-of-progress report." Others may seem outwardly fine but feel almost constant terror and threats—from peers or teachers, or from passing a mirror. The list is endless.

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And it's not as if these are the only difficulties our kids face. Everybody's life seems overly busy. A recent study at Brandeis University of teens ages 13-18 found that virtually all of them reported being under a lot of stress. When does the stress let up? Certainly not when confronting stressed-out parents. When stress meets stress, a train wreck is bound to happen.

That's where Emotional Intelligence comes in. It allows parents to communicate with their children for reasons other than discipline, thereby deepening the bond so that when parents have to play the heavy, the imposition of "limits" is easier to take.

Emotional Intelligence allows children, and parents, to: know how they and others are feeling; regulate strong emotions; set goals and make effective plans to reach them; show empathy and caring; and function soundly in relationships.

During a child's adolescence, Emotional Intelligence can help parents escort children through a positive portal to adulthood. It means treating teens as individuals growing up in a very different time from our own, and avoiding the unconscious temptation to relive our experience through them in order to get it right this time.

Helping Your Teens

Virtually every teenager walks around looking for answers to critical questions, although he or she doesn't articulate them quite this way:

"How can I understand who I am now and who I will be in the future? How can I nurture and build positive relationships? How can I develop skills to handle everyday challenges and choices? And, how can I develop a positive identity?"

Often, teenagers' behavior seems opposite to a search for answers to these questions. Such behavior is obviously frustrating for parents and teachers. Yet, these actions are actually openings to talk with teenagers. It's up to parents to recognize the signals and guide children toward opportunities, relationships and skills so

they can arrive at their own answers.

This is where FLASH comes in. FLASH is an acronym that describes various approaches for engaging your child in conversation by avoiding turning them off with a threatening line of inquiry. FLASH is a matter of figuring out what "channel" your teenager is broadcasting on, so you can focus on the real message and not just the static in the air.

CHANNEL F ***I NEED TO SAVE FACE***

Teenagers, naturally, are often embarrassed. Channel F is likely to be on when your teenager wants to reveal, perhaps unconsciously, an incident that exposed an imperfection. A sign is if children are avoiding certain people or refusing to accept certain phone calls. You can show your love and support by helping them to save face, not by pushing them into further embarrassment.

CHANNEL L ***PLEASE LISTEN TO ME***

Channel L is on when your teenager approaches you and leaves an opening that suggests something is the matter ("Oh, nothing...really; things went fine."). Channel L is not "Please, tell me what to do"; it's "Please, *listen* to me." Let them know you have time to talk if they are interested, and do a lot more listening than talking. Try to help your child clarify his or her concerns and point of view.

CHANNEL A ***I'M LOOKING TO ARGUE***

Signs of Channel A include surly behavior, challenges to your authority and negative statements and body language. Nothing you say is right or even acceptable. Don't worry about why this is happening. The longer you fail to recognize that your child is on Channel A, the more likely you will be drawn into a conflict. You cannot switch your teens from Channel A; only *they* can switch. Let them know you do not want to tune in and will join them on another channel.

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CHANNEL S **I NEED SUPPORT**

Even the most well adjusted teenager will have times when the going gets tough. Perhaps he or she had a tough exam, bad game or an argument with a friend. Don't worry about finding answers; what is needed is empathy, understanding and your expression of confidence that things will eventually get better.

CHANNEL H **I NEED HELP**

Channel H is usually activated during some very specific task like doing homework and not for the biggies like "What should I be when I grow up?" Your teen is probably tuning to Channel H when you notice clear signs of frustration. Although you may want to say, "I'll help you" or "I didn't think you could do it," you are better off believing in ESP. That stands for Evaluate, Select and Proceed. It's a way of asking your teenager (and yourself): What do you really want to have happen? What are your best ideas for getting there? It's the kind of help our teens need most—direction and guidance, not prescriptive answers.

It's Never Too Late

Some parents may feel they can no longer reach their teens. Or we see that our teens, in bouts of despair, are discouraged about the future, not believing they can become anything worthwhile. Make an effort to abide by the notions of what we call the "A, B and three C's":

- **Appreciation:** What is your teenager's cherished talent? Maybe you see it in his or her hobbies. Maybe you don't see it because it happens in the privacy of his or her room or only with trusted friends. Be alert to what it is your child really likes to do. "Multiple intelligences," according to Howard Gardner, is the range of talents that children have. Their future identities are strengthened when they have positive outlets to express and develop these tal-

ents. Regardless of the pursuit, your appreciation of your teen's efforts matters most of all. It's very important during the middle-school years.

- **Belonging:** Teens need groups to belong to. That's what motivates some to join gangs. They are looking for places where they have a role, feel accepted, discover positive peer relationships, share interests or abilities, benefit from inspiring leadership. We might like kids to find these things in their own families or schools, but this often is not the case. Clubs, teams, youth groups and community organizations can foster a sense of belonging.
- **Competencies/Life Skills:** In the new millennium, we want our children to have life skills to deal with a range of possible opportunities and the confidence to put their talents to use. These include the skills of Emotional Intelligence, to have the balance of "smart and heart" needed to manage in the world today. Especially important is how teens get over roadblocks. So don't jump to their rescue at any sign of difficulty. Check their FLASH channels first and see what they most need.
- **Contributions:** The teen years should be more about self-discovery than about selfishness. Teens actually thrive on making contributions to causes, which help foster a sense of fulfillment. And this feeling is strong enough to compete with the thrill of a lot more risky actions. Many a kid has been rescued by doing for others than by having others do for him.
- **Connections:** A parent's main task is to provide opportunities for learning—not to be the source of it. Point the way, being mindful of what things in particular, as opposed to a burden of commitments, will resonate with your child. We can't make all the decisions for our teens. We had our turn. Now, our role is to be empathic, not say, "I told you so." Help them reflect on what happened and what they can learn.

Children who are hurting don't want to be "fixed" or undergo therapy as much as they want to be nurtured, cared for and shown a positive path. Ultimately, our goal is not to raise Super Teen but someone who is emotionally well adjusted and who is knowledgeable, responsible, nonviolent and caring. That's why we subtitled our book, "Parenting with Love, Laughter and Limits." It is the combination of all these things that is essential for giving our teenagers—and our households—the emotional intelligence needed to turn the roiling waters of the middle-school years into rapids we can traverse with a sense of pride and accomplishment. □

About the Author

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