

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2021-2022 News & Notes



2022 April News and Notes

“Discovering the Lost Boys”

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

“Discovering the Lost Boys”: Strategies for Parents

In his presentation, Mark Edwards, LMFT, offered a look at the unique social and developmental struggles of teenage boys, and the social factors that contribute to these concerns. Edwards, who works with children, adolescents and adults in his private practice, also presented useful parenting strategies to help improve the social, developmental, and emotional lives of boys.

At the outset, Edwards asked attendees what they remembered from their own experience of adolescence—Body changes; dubious choices; changes in relationships; and emotional struggles. All of these challenges, he explained, still impact teens, but today’s youth must contend with “so much more.”

Emotionally, they experience what Edwards termed “yoyo development”: A wish for emancipation *and* a fear of being lost; and a wish for closeness *and* a fear of being absorbed. Neurologically, their brains are undergoing tremendous change. Some key areas of the brain are not yet fully developed by this age.

An important way parents can help their teens is in the area of skill development. Those skills teens struggle to master are recognizing and managing emotions; managing stress; developing empathic response to others; constructive conflict resolution; cooperation with others (peers, employers, etc.); and such practical skills as cooking, self care, self advocacy, and so forth.

Stress in particular is very common among today’s teens. Signs that an individual may be experiencing stress include an increase in irritability and anger; changes in behavior (formerly active, suddenly not); changes in sleeping patterns (too much or too little); changes in eating patterns (too much, too little); neglecting responsibilities; getting sick more often and expressing physical complaints.

Parents can help their teens manage stress by encouraging them to get more sleep (8 to 10 hours a night); to exercise, especially out of doors; to express themselves by writing, especially by hand (not keyboard) focusing on the positive and what one is grateful for; and practicing mindfulness, becoming aware of one’s thought patterns.

What’s to be done?

Edwards had a number of additional recommendations for parents wishing to aid their sons through this tumultuous and challenging time of development.

Listening: The first piece of advice: “Shut up. Seriously, just shut up and listen!” His reason is simple: “By the time that your child is a teen, they know everything that you think and do. Now is the time to hear what they think and do....They have been your keen observers from the beginning.”

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To facilitate conversation, you can create activities that enable your son to communicate more easily. For example, driving together in the car or simply taking a walk. Begin a conversation with an open-ended question, rather than an observation or advice. Avoid eye contact that will make him feel more uneasy.

Model the behavior you want to impart. Observing your empathy for others will work to challenge your teen's natural adolescent narcissism. This can include involving your family in volunteering and finding opportunities to instill the recognition that people who think, look and behave differently have value.

A simple strategy is to have your child practice the "rule of 3s." When giving him an allowance, have him divide it into three portions: One for him to spend as he will; the second to set aside for savings; and the third to donate.

Discuss pornography earlier than you'd like (as early as 1st grade), let them know that what they see is not real.

Emphasize the importance of consent. Edwards recommended the YouTube video, "Cup of Tea," which compares initiating sex to offering a cup of tea.

Other important messages and attitudes to convey:

Not everyone needs to like you (even adults have feet of clay).

Encourage your child to develop an active internal life with a full range of emotions. Again, personal writing can offer reinforcement of this.

Teach boys that emotional courage is as important as physical courage... give examples from your own life. Teach delayed gratification.

***Mark Edwards, LMFT**, is a psychotherapist, trainer, teacher, and consultant. He has maintained a private practice in San Rafael since 2000 and works with a broad client group of children, adolescents, and adults. He has been a member of adjunct faculty of the Master's Program in Counseling at Sonoma State University for more than 10 years, and was formerly Assistant Clinical Director at the Community Institute for Psychotherapy*