

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2021-2022 News & Notes



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“Best Protections”: Helping Vulnerable Teens

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Adolescence is a time of unique development, during which young people are learning to interact with the world in new ways. It is often a time of intense emotions, including stress, anxiety and depression. Parents can help their children navigate this important period by remaining open and approachable, and especially by building their own ability to problem-solve and handle difficult issues.

In his presentation, “Helping When Your Child Is Hurting,” Dr. Keith Sutton, PsyD, outlined characteristics of adolescent development. Teens are developing abstract thinking, questioning values, and seeing contradictions, while often unable to conceptualize the future. “Hormones,” Dr. Sutton explained, are “hijacking the limbic system,” while the frontal lobe is not yet fully developed. It’s also a time of individuation and identity development, but children “still want to turn to their parents.”

Parents can help children by taking into consideration the complexity of adolescent development and knowing how to make themselves available to teens at times of stress and unhappiness. Many things can get in the way of adolescents’ ability to talk openly with their parents, including parental substance abuse, divorce, shame, and cultural taboo.

In his practice, Dr. Sutton works directly with parents to increase their ability to help their children by strengthening positive attachment and making themselves more approachable. It’s important that parents know how to listen.

One very common problem is parents’ own fear and/or avoidance of difficult feelings. Yet without expression, anxiety and depression will only increase. When children can talk with their parents about their feelings and problems, they feel relief: they are not alone with these intense emotions.

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To help a child, therefore, the goal for parents must be to develop a tolerance for distress. “Stress is normal,” Dr. Sutton said; parents need to be able to accept a full range of emotional experiences, not avoid or dismiss them. Among the “Best Protections,” he identified to lessen children’s vulnerability to self-harm, is to be willing to discuss “the hottest topics;” being accepting of problems, failure, and disappointments; and being available to problem-solve with their children. Other protections include practicing stress management and developing healthy coping skills.

Dr. Sutton emphasized that if parents have concerns about their children’s emotional health, they must not wait for it to pass, hoping for things to get better. It is vital that parents ask children about what’s going on. Above all, they should not hesitate to get professional help if necessary.