

"It is crucial that children and young people feel that their internal experience is being heard and accepted even though their external behaviour may be unacceptable." Dan Hughes

## What do teenagers want?

**Louis Sydney writes on how you can help teens to stay connected with family life and explore the world.**

"Adolescence is a period of rapid changes. Between the ages of 12-17, for example, a parent ages as much as 20 years". (Author unknown)

The task of parenting one's children through the rite of passage of adolescence can be challenging for adoptive or non-adoptive parents.

Helping young people navigate the tricky path through education, relationships, sexuality, bodily change, identity and belonging provokes many responses from carers. Surrounding these formative transitions into adulthood are behaviours such as drug and alcohol use, internet addiction, anti-social behaviour, aggression, withdrawal and sexual promiscuity.

In my work as a child and adult psychotherapist, working with adolescents and their families, I often hear some urban myths from parents:

- They only want to be with their friends
- He doesn't want to be with us
- She wants her independence....to grow up
- What do I have to offer? I just don't understand him
- All they want to do is spend time on the internet

There are of course some kernels of truth within these statements yet they often mask parent's own confusion about how to find ways of relating to their teenage children.

One parent asked me recently 'What do teenagers want? Tell me!' It is an important question that is unique to each young person and sits alongside the question 'What do teenagers need?'

Both of the above questions emerged during recent family work with Anna, a 14-year-old girl and her adoptive parents.

The girl had suffered significant early life neglect until she was 18-months old and was adopted when she was three. There had been ongoing issues and therapeutic interventions since she was six and things had come to a head following recent internet activity that led to her attempting to make contact with her birth family.

When police brought her home drunk in the early hours of the morning, her parents decided to re-engage with family therapy. I had decided to ask her directly 'what do teenagers want?' She responded immediately 'They (her parents) never listen to me! They go on and on and on...'

Although I trusted that her parents were indeed trying to listen to her, I also trusted that a part of her did not feel heard.

I had to find the *legitimate need* beneath her angry behaviour. It is crucial that children and young people feel that their internal experience is being heard and accepted even though their external behaviour may be unacceptable.

This creates a more secure attachment and enables a more integrated sense of self. Robert Karen in his book *Becoming Attached* describes that 'to be understood instead of punished, to express anger and not be rejected, to complain and be taken seriously, to be frightened and not have one's fear trivialised, to be depressed and unhappy and to feel taken care of and to express a self doubt and be listened to and not judged' are critical aspects of parenting in late childhood. This is the basis of reflective listening. Dan Hughes describes how 'It is crucial to communicate that the adult is making a genuine effort to fully understand the adolescent's perspective before presenting his own'. Anna and her parents had become so embroiled in arguments that what Anna wanted was not being heard and reflected back. She needed to *feel felt*. Discussions with her parents brought us to what Anna might need: specific detailed praise. Anna's parents often gave her well-intended praise such as 'Well done', 'That was great!' 'Fantastic homework!'

The trouble with this was that Anna had begun to recognise that her parents were trying to bolster her challenging behaviour by simply being positive. This strategy was also flagging because their non-verbal communication revealed that they felt annoyed.

I encouraged them to offer praise for any specific behaviour that they noticed such as: 'I liked the way you passed me your laundry', 'I noticed how you really made effort with the way you have dressed', 'I really appreciated you staying in the room and being with us as I know you may have been tempted to go to your room, thank you'.

Both parents noticed within a month that Anna was more responsive and affectionate with them both.

Another area of focus was helping them to find some fun in family life. Anna had made clear that she perceived that her parents didn't 'want to do stuff anymore....mum is always on the computer; dad is always at work'. Anna *wanted* to spend more time doing interesting things. I knew that she had a specific interest in singing and she had just been to see the film, *Les Miserables*. I suggested that the family take part in a 'Les Miserable' afternoon on the Saturday, whereby, they could only sing to each other between 12-6pm. A very reluctant father found himself singing:

'Are you ready for lunch?  
Are we ready to munch?  
If you don't feed your dad  
He'll be hungry and sad'

The family found themselves enjoying the simple pleasure of belly laughing together. These ways of playful interaction also build bonds of attachment and enable creative responses in formerly difficult situations. Three weeks later, the father collected his daughter from school after she had been bullied.

When he asked 'How was school?' She replied with her usual stock response: 'Fine'. The father later said 'I don't know what came over me but I just started singing to her: I guess your friends have been really mean....Is it the worst you've ever seen?' Anna began to sing back to him and they had a 25-minute conversation about what happened at school through singing. The father later admitted that she had never revealed so much of herself.

Closely attached to Anna's wish for more fun, was an identified *need* for both parents to consider the importance of making time versus taking time. In the

past, there had been a tendency to be opportunistic in responding to the children's needs for engagement. Play was mostly fitted in between family chores, while the meal was cooking or on the move. The children needed the parents to be pro-active and make special time for child led play and activities. Anna suggested that the family go to a show and join in on a family bike ride every Saturday morning.

The process of trying to ensure that a family remains connected requires ongoing and mindful attention to the day-to-day happenings within a family. By making a conscious effort to continue to develop meaningful relationships through the course of adolescence, parents provide the opportunity for their children to become more confident, autonomous young adults. I once went to a workshop led by James Hillman, a renowned psychotherapist and writer about the soul's journey in life. I described my work to him and asked about how to help adopted children with the task of growing up. He responded by saying that for many young people today, the task is to 'grow down'. By this, he was referring to the urgent need for adopted children to be rooted within the earth of family experience.

For Anna (and many children like her) it was important to be able to go out in the world and explore the edges of what life had to offer. At times, she did engage in risk taking behaviour or made friends with people who did not always have her best interests at heart. However, she did always swing back towards the safety, love and care of her adoptive parents. This process of going out in the world and coming home to a sense of belonging and reliance on her parents, allowed her to find a way through adolescence.

'Autonomy is most easily established from a base of secure relationships that will endure beyond adolescence' Kim Golding

### **Five Principles for Parenting Adolescents:**

1. What do children want? Try to discover the underlying need behind behaviour and engage in active listening to your child's experience.
2. Provide specific praise by regularly commenting and noticing what your child does well even if this lasts for only a moment.
3. Find the fun in your family and engage in child led games and activities.
4. Make special, sacred time with your children for play, conversation and downtime.
5. Hold in mind an adolescents dual need to both go out in the world and re-connect. The child's behaviour during 're-entry- into family life may be clumsy, challenging and oppositional as a way to guard against feelings of dependency which activate early life anxiety.

#### References

Golding, Kim: *Nurturing Attachments*; Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008

Hughes, Dan: *Principles of Attachment & Intersubjectivity* (A chapter from *Teenagers and Attachment*); Worth Reading Publishing, 2009.

Karen, Robert: *Becoming Attached*; Oxford University Press, 1998.

