Parenting “Difficult” Adolescents

Why “nothing works” and why there is hope

By Terrance D. Olson

Parenting can be presented as a three-dimensional activity. Research on adolescence suggests that the ideal environment of invitation and influence is created when parents are high on nurturance (rather than being distant, alien or aloof, hostile, or resentful), moderate on setting limits and having rules, and high on reasoning with adolescents (rather than being dictatorial or command oriented) (Jaffe, 1998). So when you as a three-dimensional parent have been those three things... and... nothing seems to “work,” the question quickly arises, What now? Even when it seems we have done everything, there is reason for hope that something can be done.

One way to think about this task is to ask, “How do we parent difficult adolescents?” To ask that question may be a clue to the starting point of our problems. Think back to the last time someone assumed something about you or labeled you. It could have been at the office, where you overheard a group of employees referring to you as old “talks a lot,” or as “all speed and no direction,” or as “knows so much he doesn’t know what he doesn’t know.” You probably didn’t think the label fit, and were convinced that those describing you had just revealed themselves as having no insight—and being impudent and unteachable at that. Stephen R. Covey has popularized an idea from C. Terry Warner: To see others as the problem is the problem. That may be overstating the truth some, given that even if we were to cease seeing our teenagers—or coworkers in the office—as the problem, there may still be a problem. But the important point of the Warner-Covey idea is that until we see others in a non-labeling, non-accusatory way, we cannot see the truth about them, and thus we really don’t see the starting point for solutions to real problems. If, for example, I decide in advance that you are to blame for something, I am not granting the possibility that someone else may be responsible for the problem. If you are already my chosen target, then I will see in you and in the situation whatever confirms my decision about you.
Thus, once I see you as difficult, or as having no direction, or as being the kind of person who isn't aware of his or her own ignorance, I am looking for proof of that position, not for facts.

Adolescents, in our culture, suffer from preconceived notions regarding what "they" (as a category of persons) are like. Of course, all prejudices may be grounded in real possibilities. It is just that when we proceed from prejudice, we generalize a possibility into a total reality. We would help ourselves by suspending labels in favor of imagining possibilities.

For example, when my associates and I took a character and citizenship education curriculum into the public schools, we were reminded by some professionals that "adolescents only live in the present moment. They are not future oriented." This idea, if absolutely correct, meant we were a bit naïve in trying to teach our curriculum. Two ideas from our curriculum are illustrative:

1. Every act in the present moment is an act for or against the next generation.

2. Consider that your acts in the present moment either enhance or reduce the likelihood of a quality future.

Both these ideas assume a human sensibility of being able to imagine the future. They suggest that teenagers can benefit from doing more than seeing only the present moment. If adolescents are somehow "hard-wired" to be insulated from considering the future, our work would have been in vain. We were about to teach ideas that would probably fail, given "how teenagers are."

What we found, though, was that when we gave adolescents a chance to consider the future—to gauge their current actions by considering future consequences, many of them did just that. Many were willing to consider the consequences of their educational pursuits, their financial decisions, their ways of behaving in relationships. From our work with high school students, we discovered the better truth to tell about adolescents is that if you give them a chance to imagine the future, many do so with insight and understanding. (Wallace & Olson, 1984).

The point is that if we, as parents, label our children, in advance, according to "how teenagers are," then in our subsequent involvement with them, we eclipse certain possibilities of how we might invite and entice them to do good, to live responsibly, to make constructive, rather than destructive choices. At the least, in times of parent-adolescent conflict, we must acknowledge that our children may behave badly, but that their destructive approach to life, while absolutely real, is also absolutely unnecessary. That is, their destructiveness is not because "that's just the way they are—teenagers"—but because they are being destructive, or contentious, or arrogant. There is even the painful possibility that all those attitudes are mirrors of how we have sometimes been. We must assume they (and we) can be otherwise. If we do not do that, we just become part of the problem by assuming "that's just the way they are," and we begin to be illustrations of prejudice and labeling, all the while feeling we are justified and doing the best we can do in a bad situation.
Parents sometimes long to be more skilled than they know how to be. They sometimes think if they were better at a given technique, they could turn their children’s lives around. But there is something more fundamental than technique. It is the first task. It involves the quality of the relationship itself, and that cannot be grounded in mere technique or strategy, but in the heart. This is another way of asking parents to consider their ways regarding how they see and respond to their children. Imagine this scenario:

After a verbal fight with his parents, Nick Kanell withdraws $400.00 from his savings account, buys a nationwide go-anywhere bus pass, and hits the road. When Nick does not show up at dinner, his parents assume he is doing what he has done before—retreated to the house of one of his friends. By the second evening, Nick’s parents call the typical places he has “hidden” before, and discover those friends and their parents have not seen Nick for several days. Now the Kanells are worried. They discover, through their regular on-line banking routine, that Nick has taken money from his savings account on which they are co-signers. At dinner, the parents decide that if Nick wants to run away, FINE! Maybe facing the harsh world alone will teach him something. But that night, unbeknownst to each other, both Mr. and Mrs. Kanell toss and turn. At some point in the night, they sense they should do something.

The next morning at breakfast, the Kanells admit to each other that they have been wrong and that they both feel they must file a missing person’s report on Nick. As they are about to go to the police station, they hear a noise in the garage. Mr. Kanell opens the door to the garage and steps out onto the cement step. Sitting on his backpack is Nick, who looks up sullenly at his father from underneath unkempt hair.

Nick had made the mistake of not boarding an express bus, and as a result had endured a journey where the bus got off the freeway for every little town, stopping about every 45 minutes. After ten or eleven hours of this, he had just stayed at the café in wherever and did not re-board the bus. It is true he at first didn’t care where the bus took him, but it also became true for him that he didn’t know where he was going or what he would do when he got there. He decided, therefore, to hop the next bus going back toward home. His attitude was not one of defeat, but of defiance. During the return journey, he replayed in his mind all the times when his parents had been unfair, condescending, dictatorial, critical, nagging, and self-righteous. He was preparing his ammunition for the confrontational reunion. Now, as he looked up at his father’s frame on the garage step, he could predict exactly what his dad was going to say. “I suppose you realize you’ve worried your mother

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sick!” Nick always resented that his dad spoke for and defined his mother’s feelings in advance—twisting the knife of guilt in Nick’s stomach. Nick knew his mother would appear on the step at any moment, and become nauseatingly protective. “Oh, poor baby, are you all right?” uttered in a plaintive, wailing tone like some amateur soprano on a hunt for the right note. Nick had them all figured out, all labeled.

Nick was brought back to reality by his father speaking unpredictable words: “Oh, good, Nick, you got here just in time. The clam chowder is just about ready.” Nick now wonders what kind of gimmick this is. What?—no lecture, no reminder that he has again demonstrated he just can’t be trusted? What is this? Nick fires a verbal salvo, “Okay, dad, what are you trying to pull?” His father drops his eyes to the ground, shifts his weight from side to side for a few moments, and, with his hands in his pockets, stutters, “Okay, you’ve got me. The truth is, we haven’t even opened the clam chowder yet.” This was becoming a conversation from the Twilight Zone. Nick couldn’t wrap his mind around it. Something was fishy—and it wasn’t that clam chowder was his favorite soup. His mother appears on the step. “Well, Nick, your father and I have been worried and we were crazy enough to think that if we put on some chowder, you would smell it and be willing to come home.” At that moment, the thought that flashed through Nick’s mind was, “How do you fight with these people?” Nick goes into the house, his mother asks him to open a can of clam chowder, and they sit down to talk.

This may sound like a bizarre incident. Perhaps so. But it is characterized by parents giving up the labels they had attached to their son. The parents have abandoned the patterned, predictable, accusatory, all-knowing responses to their son’s recurring irresponsibility and belligerence. They did not change in order to change their son. Their change was not just a new way to manipulate. They had become consumed by genuine concern. Upon Nick’s return, they did not jettison their compassion and return to a relentless accusatory way of being (“All right, young man, where have you been! How dare you worry us this way... etc., etc.”). Rather, they told the truth in love. The researchers would say they were nurturant rather than hostile or distant. Because the parents had transformed their attitude toward Nick, they could say and do the surprising things they did.

This story was told me by Nick (not his real name). Remember, he was well-prepared for another typical confrontation with his parents. He had stockpiled his verbal ammunition and was ready for another firefight. He was experienced. He usually won. The signs of his past victories were usually his father’s anger and his mother’s sobs and tears. Those triumphs, by the way, always had been accompanied by a hollow feeling in Nick, but he had learned to camouflage all external signs of emptiness, even from himself.

One of the casualties of Nick’s parents’ change of heart was that they had also given up the labels of Nick they had come to use in their defensive-ness against him. Now they had the freedom to express concern, to apologize for their role in the problems that had characterized their relationship these long, past months. As Nick noted already, he was so surprised by their greeting that what he was prepared for turned into a reality he was unprepared for. Remember Nick’s thought: “How do you fight with these people?” Indeed. His ammunition was worthless. Unusable. Ineffective.

I do not know additional details. I suspect they really did sit down to hastily prepared clam chowder at 10:30 A.M. I do not have the parents’ report of this incident. I am guessing that the incident in the garage was not the end of their relationship problems with Nick. But I believe it was the beginning of their solutions. My best evidence is that as Nick told me the story (at least three years after the fact), he was without bitterness or self-justification. He told me the story to illustrate, not what his parents had done to him, but how he had used their resentful, accusing manner to justify himself. He had to give up his labels as much as they had to give up theirs. It is true that their compassion and concern upon his return was a powerful invitation to see them in a new way. They may not have been particularly skillful, but once they turned their hearts to Nick, the quality of their interaction with him changed.
This is what it means to be nurturant rather than hostile. It is possible for parents to be so. To be compassionate is no guarantee that a belligerent son will change his attitude. Be that as it may, being nurturant is still the first and best invitation to someone else to change. It is in nurturance that we no longer are seeking to protect our image, justify ourselves, or “make them see” what we “know” is best for them. It is the first step any parent can and must take if they wish to rebuild a relationship with a rebellious teenager—who really isn’t “just that way,” however real the consequences of such resentments may be. To paraphrase Vaclav Havel: “When a person tries to act in accordance with his conscience, when he is compassionate, and tells the truth in love, even when being compassionate is degraded, it won’t necessarily lead anywhere, but it might. There’s one thing, however, that will never lead anywhere, and that is speculating that such behavior will lead somewhere” (Havel, 1990, xvi). (I presented that as a paraphrase of Havel, because he was speaking of being a citizen of conscience in a society that punished one for being conscientious. He spoke it at a press conference after the fall of the Iron Curtain, which meant he was no longer a political prisoner in his native land of Czechoslovakia.)

The parenting version of that thought is that, when we love our children, when we ache regarding their rebellions or how they place themselves in jeopardy physically, morally, or legally, we can simultaneously hold to a nurturing spirit and to the limits we have set that we believe will save them. Whether our children accept our nurturance or spit on it, it is never a reason to abandon our efforts. Being compassionate is probably a matter of conscience—a matter of being true to our moral sense regarding how to treat others. It is requisite that we stay on compassionate ground, even when our children, knowingly or as clever destructors, provoke us to abandon our compassion and respond to them in resentment. When we do respond in resentment (when we abandon our nurturant way of being), we usually come across exactly as they are accusing us—in a dictatorial, morally superior, resentful manner.

It may be that the difference between being demeaning or emotionally distant is not so much a lack of skill as it is an abandoning of our deepest feelings of love for a son or daughter who, confronted by our nurturance, may give up their huffy impatience with us. It is unlikely, if we are doing to them what they, in their rebellion, are doing to us, that they will do anything other than retreat more deeply into their own resentments and justifications. If all we ever do in response to those children we are afraid we are losing is be compassionate, telling the truth in love, we are doing the most important thing, we are being the most important kind of person we can be.

By the way, my own take on what Havel meant—by saying that speculating about whether our behavior will lead anywhere won’t lead anywhere—is this: Since both being a citizen and being a compassionate parent are grounded in conscience, they are grounded in our deepest moral feelings. We cannot be manipulative about that. We can only be true to such feelings and learn from how others respond to them. Typically, being true to such feelings includes being committed to—and for the other person—aching for their success, often more than they do themselves. But at least we are doing something from which we can learn what else might be right to do, and being self-forgetful about our own image and being concerned for others is a feature of what we are doing.

One of those right things is to consider the spirit and content of the limits we set and the consequences we implement. The setting of limits and consequences is another dimension of parenting research that is relevant for our discussion of how to interact with “difficult” teenagers.

In the research spawned by our character and citizenship curriculum were adolescents’ reports of the discipline they received at home. Students reported parents as either “not strict at all,” as “moderately strict,” or as “extremely strict.” Those students who reported parents as “not strict at all” were twice as likely to participate in premarital sexual relationships as those who reported a moderate amount of rules. The next most “at-risk” category of discipline at home, at least with respect to whether or not the adolescent engaged in self-destructive behaviors, was, “extremely strict.” We did not measure the relationship between nurturance and strictness of discipline. But it appears that parents who are reported to have no rules create, in our relatively permissive
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society, the most at-risk atmosphere for adolescent growth and development. Of course, there are two explanations for these results. Since we do not have a context that allows us to unequivocally define a cause, these results could either reflect that adolescent at-risk behaviors are the consequence of parental disciplinary practices, or that parental disciplinary practices are the consequence of adolescent at-risk behaviors. For example, adolescents demonstrate lack of responsibility in honoring parental curfews, completing homework, doing their share of home chores, etc., and so the strictness of the parents follows. Or, extremely restrictive parental rules (and defensive, we-are-always-right attitudes) provoke rebellion in the adolescent. In either event, the best case scenario is that a moderate amount of rules correlates with more responsible behavior than either many or few rules. When moderate rules are linked with a nurturant home atmosphere, the general outcome should be mutually beneficial to parents and adolescents.

The third dimension of parental influence is also likely best carried out in a nurturing environment with a moderate number of rules or principles. It involves reasoning with teenagers rather than being dictatorial. This means examining causes and consequences, principles and practices, logical
starting points and likely outcomes. In fact, the more a parent reasons with a teenager about such things as responsibilities and rules, the more likely the discussions will include the "why" of parental involvement in their lives—and the more likely the teenager will respect and be responsive to the rules.

Reasoning is a means of showing the value of being rational, of showing how certain decisions lead to certain consequences, or of discussing why some ways of living are inherently destructive. The big picture of reasoning, however, is as a means of examining the meaning of human experience. Humans are meaning-makers. Adolescents are searching for meaning—from the specifics of an incident at school to the more general questions about the purpose of life. This search for meaning may include questions regarding relevance, understanding, belonging, success, value, worth, and competence. Parents who offer starting points of meaning are doing more than helping students understand the why of family boundaries, consequences, chores, homework, helping others, or showing respect to teachers and grandmother. These specific contexts contribute to a deeper sense of what it means to be human, what it means to be a family member, and what it means to live a life of high quality. It also places the parent as a major influence regarding how a teenager chooses to make his or her way in the world. Surveys of teenagers regarding who influences them the most usually produce parents as the prime influence, followed closely by peer groups. Parents who reason about the value of school, of giving your best, are showing an interest in the well-being and the future of their children. Parents who give up on being of influence could be underestimating the possibilities. For example, in our citizenship work in the public schools, parental involvement in school performance turned out to be a major influence on some kinds of adolescent decision-making. Teenagers who reported parents as very interested in their grades or in their personal achievements were twice as likely to report sexual abstinence as those students who say that parents do not feel grades or achievements are important. Of course, a teenager who is already rebellious may see discussions about grades as another form of parental nagging and meddling. Just because a teenager may resent your inquiries regarding their school performance, however, does not disqualify parental attempts as having value. Of course, to be involved in a nurturant way, while operating consistently on correct principles (and rules as necessary), helps color parental reasoning regarding issues of decisions such as responsible school behavior.

Reasoning about responsible behavior often can include questions that invite the teen to consider future consequences of current choices. Looking
at the future is not the only way to reason about issues, but it is a typical and usually beneficial activity. Imagine an issue that is important to you, but seems to be resisted by your son or daughter. Consider asking them one or two of the following questions:

1. I know you think I am a nag about this, so consider this possibility: If I weren’t here to bug you about it, what would be the consequence to you of whatever choice you make?

2. If your younger sister started doing what you are now doing, how would that help or hinder her future?

3. If your best friend asked you to consider what I am asking you to consider, how would you answer him?

4. You may think I am being relentless about this because I want to be the enemy, but pretend for a minute I am interested in you having a quality future. How would you then explain my position?

5. I don’t know all the good and bad consequences of this decision you are considering, but how have you thought it out? What have you imagined about the outcomes so far?

6. What does taking this path mean to you? Explain it to me as best you can.

These questions are simply meant to be conversation starters, in a context of care and concern, where people can reasonably consider reasons for a given choice, action, decision, or direction. They are invitations, not to be hostile or defensive, but to come and reason together. If the response to such questions is still resentment and rebellion, then perhaps the best response is to declare your sorrow and retreat for the moment: “Chad, I think you see me as the enemy on this, and I don’t know what to do about that. I just see some threats on your horizon and would like to know if you see them too, or if you think I am just off base.” If that comment brings a non-defensive response (“I do see risk here, Dad, but I think you don’t have enough confidence in my good sense.”), then the best follow-up is to seek more information: “O.K. I may be blind to how you are thinking about it. Tell me about the risks you see.” If that fosters additional disclosure (“Well, Dad, there is no sure thing here, but I believe I can handle it”), then it might be appropriate to keep going: “Tell me what your good sense is helping you make of that. You have spent more time thinking about it than I have.”

These are merely examples of non-defensive starting points for considering how and whether anyone has reasoned about the causes and consequences of some act. Notice that humility and meekness (but not indulgence or weakness) are features of being non-defensive. These parents are no longer focused on their image, on the idea of “being perfect,” but on the idea of giving their best, and of seeking to understand. They are self-forgetful in their endeavors in behalf of their children.

A young man had once run away from home. The father and this 16-year-old son had quarreled over the boy’s quitting high school. The father had stressed the value and necessity of school, but to no avail. After a week or so, the father appeared on the doorstep of the family who was harboring his son. The mother in that home was surprised to see the boy’s father, and at first mumbled a bit, pondering whether to deny that the boy was there. The father made it easy: “Look, I know Roy is here. I just want to talk to him.” Roy came out on the porch. “How are things?” his dad asked. “Okay.” His father sat down and, after a pause, said, “I have been wondering how you’ve been doing, and I’ve been doing some thinking. I want to make something clear, and I want to understand how you feel about what I am going to say.” The boy only nodded. Dad continued: “I still believe school is the best thing for you. It is best for your future. It keeps doors of opportunity open. BUT... If you still would rather go to work than go back to school, I will help you get the best job we can find. If you ever want to come back, you are welcome at home. If you were to come back home and go back to school, then the rules would be the same—do your part with the chores, do homework before play, honor the no drinking and no drugs rules, and be home by curfew. If you were to come back home and get a full-time job, then you would pay rent, do your own laundry, keep your portion of the house clean, and honor the curfew and no drinking/no drugs rules. If that continues until you are eighteen, then we can talk
again about the conditions of you being at home. I want a home where your younger brothers and sisters understand that we work together to make life work. Their job is to be in school, give their best, and help make the home a comfortable, clean place to be. I expect that of you, too, unless you want to go to work. Then your job is not school, but your job. And if you are employed, we would replace general chores with rent.*

Such a declaration from a father may seem one-sided. Perhaps so. But it is nurturing, non-defensive, affirming of rules, explaining of reasons, and offering a possibility. It implicitly says to the boy, “You matter to me—even though we disagree.” It is also an offer for the boy to be reasonable and disclosing, but is not demanding of either. In fact, in the actual occurrence of this father’s visit, the boy did not take the father up on the invitation to return and allow his father to help in school or help him find a job. But the father did a right thing. He, like all of us, had no guarantee of the outcome of his offer. But when we believe something is right to do, we must do it, irrespective of the outcome. We long for and pray for an outcome that will turn our children to responsible, wise, non-rebellious decisions, but we cannot dictate those outcomes.

A widow discovered two of her children had gotten involved in drugs. After minimal interventions by her and brushes with the juvenile justice system, the mother pondered what would be right to do. She went to the boys and explained that she had searched the country for the best treatment programs and, given that they were still legal minors, she had the authority to require them to go there and “get clean.” She indicated that she only had enough money for a certain number of months for them to be there. If they came out free of the habit, they would have a new starting point. If they went back to drugs, she could no longer help them financially. She left the two in the facility with the older boy pleading with her not to leave him there. She was compassionately firm—even in sorrow that she would be separated from them. She visited regularly. The first sign of getting anywhere at all with the harder, older boy was when, two months later, he apologized to her for being the one who had introduced his younger brother to drug use. Acknowledging his role in undermining his brother’s well-being was a small affirmation of her hope. Up to that point, she had been the target of the older boy’s resentment and bitterness. His humility about fostering his younger brother’s destruction could have been feigned. In this case, it was not. By the end of the treatment period she had funds for, the mother reported that her boys returned clean. As to the permanence of their change, “only time will tell.” But we do what we do as parents because we believe we should do what can be done. Of course, we pray the change will be permanent. But that eventuality is in the hands of the adolescents themselves. Doing what is right and possible to invite them to change is in our hands.

Given the ideas of being nurturing, moderate in rules, and reasoning as parents, so what? How are we to proceed when our children seem to run the other way or in other ways reject our love, our principles, our rationality? It is clear that when we abandon nurturance in favor of resentment, hostility, or aloofness, we remove ourselves from being a positive influence. It is typical that if we establish many, many rules about everyday life instead of articulate a few principles that guide family relationships, we can provoke resistance and rebellion. And, if we choose to be dictators rather than “reasoners,” we similarly push our adolescents away from us at the very time they are reasoning extensively about what is meaningful about life and about their own place in the world. The choice of whether we will be an inviting influence in the lives of our teenagers is ours. The choice of whether they will respond to our invitations is theirs. We have no justification in giving up just because they happen to be running the other way. We continue to invite and entice to do good by being nurturing, principled, and reasonable. We engage in doing small things with the hope that something great—the saving of our children—will be the outcome. Our lot and obligation is to never give up.

How might we summarize the possibilities, then, of how to respond to the difficulties teenagers help create for themselves and for our families?

1. When confronted by difficulties with our youth, avoid diagnosing or labeling them in ways that shut off our own responsible attempts to
understand their world and invite them back to the fold. We give up our pre-conceived labels and look for possibilities.

2. Ultimately, influence with the rebellious or resistant rests in the relationship, not in the skills or techniques we invoke. Nurturance, principles, and reasoning are more fundamental to influence than skills or techniques. This is because if we implement whatever skills or techniques we have while being resentful, extremely rule-oriented, or dictatorial, we have become part of the problem. (Incidentally, when we are part of the problem, we will often deny it or be blind to the possibility that our hearts are not right. Tell-tale signs of our being blind to our role in the problem are in whether we are being defensive or constantly justifying ourselves.)

3. Our purpose or meaning for engaging teens is because we are committed to their best interests, and not to our own image or authority. (Our approach for adolescents is most effective when we are in it for them instead of for us.)

4. The research dimensions of parental influence haven't changed in decades. We favor nurturance over resentment or aloofness, being principle-centered over rule-driven, being rational and reasoning over being dictatorial.

5. Being an example means to strive in all humility and honesty, and not to preserve some false notions of perfection and image.

6. We have no guarantees, no warranties regarding how adolescents will respond, and yet we have confidence our influence can be responded to and that resentments can be given up. 

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