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Developmental consultation with parents

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Developmental consultation with parents

Abstract

Wendy is a parent of a 12-year-old who has a lot of freedom and few responsibilities. When people respond to Wendy's frustration concerning her son's behavior with the suggestion of a few ground rules, Wendy throws up her hands and says, "He won't listen to me. What can I do? He's bigger than I am. It's easier to just do it myself." Sue has twin seventh grade daughters with whom she has established a pretty good relationship. "My only complaint is the kitchen. We all use it. I can't stand it being a mess, but I'm the only one who feels that way. It seems the only time the girls pitch in is when I'm on the verge of flipping out about it.". Mike has always felt close to his son. ".Suddenly Matt hit adolescence and I hardly know him. He really used to share a lot, but now I can barely get one word answers from him. I feel completely shut out of his life.". The above scenarios represent typical concerns parents have about their adolescents. Talk to any parent of an 11 - 14 year old and you're likely to hear words like frustration, fear, guilt, anger, anxiety and discomfort. Previously cooperative children suddenly become rebellious and rude. As illustrated by the first situation, it is also common for children who were once easy to control to suddenly take the upper hand (Bluestein, 1993).

Developmental Consultation With Parents

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Mike has always felt close to his son. "Suddenly Matt hit adolescence and I hardly know him. He really used to share a lot, but now I can barely get one-word answers from him. I feel completely shut out of his life."

The above scenarios represent typical concerns parents have about their adolescents. Talk to any parent of an 11 - 14 year old and you're likely to hear words like frustration, fear, guilt, anger, anxiety and discomfort. Previously cooperative children suddenly become rebellious and rude. As illustrated by the first situation, it is also common for children who were once easy to control to suddenly take the upper hand (Bluestein, 1993).

What's wrong here? Why do so many parents dread adolescence? Why do so many parent-child relationships falter at this stage? What can the school counselor do to alleviate the concerns and confusion of parents and provide them with the tools they need to gain an understanding of their adolescent?

The purpose of this paper is to address these questions and to look at some alternative ways for parents to find the answers. The characteristics of

adolescent development and their impact on the parent-child relationship will be described. Next, the school counselors' role as a consultant to parents regarding adolescent development will be addressed. Finally, two commercially distributed parent programs which teach communication skills necessary for maintaining a healthy parent-child relationship will be described.

The Changing Needs of Adolescents

Children's needs keep changing as they grow. Bluestein (1993) notes that by the time adolescence rolls around, it is developmentally normal for children to attempt to separate from their parents. Parental control, or the illusion of control, typically diminishes as children get older. The limits that are necessary to keep young children safe and secure become less restrictive as their need for independence strengthens. "Sometimes it's hard to keep up, especially during adolescence, when your child can be adultlike one minute and infantile the next" (Bluestein, 1993, p.16).

Curran (1989) contends that because adolescents and their needs keep changing parenting strategies that once worked beautifully can suddenly be ineffective. Children who once thrived on parental approval are now far more interested in the approval of their peers. The once respected limits, values, and opinions of the parents will now be challenged, even in the healthiest families.

According to Curran (1989), this shift from dependence to independence becomes even more obvious depending on the type of relationship parents have with their children. For example, authoritarian relationships usually involve win-lose situations, with the children on the losing end. As adolescents, they now

have the need to use their resources and to exert their new found power to turn that around.

Licklider (personal communication, March 1994) notes that parental expectations are significant as children enter adolescence. Suddenly parents are seeing their child in a rapidly developing body and imagine that his or her emotional growth is following suit. Unfortunately, sensibility and maturity rarely emerge in the face of adolescent hormonal changes. "Adolescent behavior can be remarkably inconsistent, and a moment's lapse into apparent responsibility doesn't necessarily indicate instant adulthood" (B. Licklider, personal communication, March 1994).

How do parents deal with the many changes which accompany adolescence? Is dealing with these changes something that just goes along with being a parent? Do the changes triggered in adolescents at puberty also trigger changes in the abilities of parents to communicate with their children? In their book, What Growing Up is All About (1995), Vernon and Al-Mabuk address these and other questions. In particular, the authors suggest that parents of adolescents reevaluate their previous parenting techniques and gain an understanding of what their adolescent is experiencing in order to communicate more effectively.

Characteristics of Adolescent Development

Vernon & Al-Mabuk (1995) assure parents that, as much as they might wish, at some point between the ages of 11 and 14 their adolescent will become a stranger to them. While this metamorphosis occurs at different rates and with

varying intensities, it is inevitable, as well as frightening, for both parents and adolescents.

Curran (1989) suggests that these fears can be alleviated if parents have an understanding of how adolescents develop physically, intellectually, personally, socially and emotionally. If parents are able to see their adolescent in specific and separate developmental stages, the behaviors they are noticing will seem normal when viewed as a whole.

One question that both parents and adolescents may be asking themselves at this stage is 'What is *normal*?'. Thomas (1992) points out two common uses of the term. The first refers to how much an adolescent's development and consequent behavior are like others of the same sex, age, grade, ethnic background, birth order, socioeconomic background, and the like. The second use of *normal* - that of desirability and acceptability - refers to how closely the adolescent's condition matches the value system of the person making the judgment about normality. It is possible, according to Thomas, for an adolescent to be normal in the first sense and abnormal in the second, or vice versa. "A fourteen-year-old could be judged statistically normal in the use of marijuana in a community in which 70 percent of the age group has used the drug, but abnormal in the sense of desirable behavior." (p. 118). It is important for parents to understand adolescent development so they can decide for themselves what is normal and what is not. Therefore, specific information about each stage of early adolescent development is described more thoroughly in the following sections.

Physical Development

"Your son tries out for the seventh grade basketball team. Players range from four feet, two inches to six feet tall. The coach is always joking around with the taller boys but doesn't seem to have time for the smaller ones." (The Surprising Years, 1985, p.9). This situation illustrates the need for parents to gain an understanding of the physical differences between their adolescent and others the same age as well as an understanding of the changes to expect as the adolescent gets older.

The rapid physical changes during this period can only be compared to those at infancy (Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995) and because of this, adolescents experience such feelings as embarrassment, awkwardness and anxiety. Self-conscious feelings about their body image usually result from the variation in the rate at which these changes occur. The authors stress that it is important for parents to be aware of and sensitive to the changes taking place in their children. Normalizing the changes and letting teenagers know that parents are available to talk when they feel comfortable is also very important. "As a parent, you need to feel comfortable answering questions your adolescent might have. Try to be as honest as possible, and, above all, don't simply hand your teenager a book to read" (Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995, p.102).

Curran (1989) and Thomas (1992) note that erratic and inconsistent behaviors occur at this stage. Both authors report that adolescents become restless and feel a constant need to release energy, which is closely related to characteristics in the emotional stage of development relating to how that energy

is released. Of particular concern to parents during this period are the ravenous appetites and peculiar tastes in food.

Intellectual Development

The primary characteristic of this stage is that adolescents are no longer limited by what they see or hear directly, nor are they restricted by the problem at hand. They can now imagine the conditions of a problem - past, present, or future - and develop hypotheses about what might happen (Thomas, 1992). The following examples of the challenging of authority illustrate Thomas' points. "Why do I have to make my bed? I'm just going to sleep in it again tonight. I read this poem over three times, and I don't see anything in it about death. What is the teacher talking about? Why do I have to have a curfew? Don't you trust me?" (The Surprising Years, 1985, p. 22).

Vernon and Al-Mabuk (1995) explain these challenges of authority by noting that during the early adolescent stage of development is when teenagers gradually begin making the shift from concrete, literal thinking to formal operational thought. With this shift comes the ability to view the world in an entirely different way. For example, what was once vague and ambiguous concept is now understood, what was once a cluttered and unorganized room is now a sophisticated system, and what was once an impossible situation has now become a welcomed challenge.

Because adolescents are gradually developing the capability to think of several possibilities, they may often feel frustrated. Having so many choices and alternatives will, at first, seem overwhelming to teenagers as they begin this stage of development. Parents may see a gradual increase in sensitivity to

criticism and a more emotional reaction to what were once insignificant situations. What parents need to keep in mind is that their adolescent is not necessarily reacting to them personally. Acknowledging that this stage fosters the development of independent thought and the testing of previously established boundaries will make it easier for parents to allow their teen to, within reason, explore new ways of looking at the world (Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995).

This new ability to deal with the abstract, reports Curran (1989), brings with it a preference for active learning opportunities which allow the adolescent to express his or her individuality and originality. For example, their interest in diverse populations and exploration of different attitudes toward authority increases the desire to challenge the "shoulds" presented by previously unquestioned hierarchies.

In a summary of Piaget's Formal Operations Period, Thomas (1992) notes that by age fifteen the framework of the average adolescent's thinking has evolved into its mature state. This does not mean, however, that there is no intellectual growth beyond adolescence. Though the framework of thought is complete, it is not all filled in yet. Further experiences during the years of youth and adulthood will fill in the outline with more knowledge.

Self-Development

"Your son, a rather shy boy, draws a three day in-school suspension for smoking in the parking lot. Your eighth grade daughter has begun to go steady and you suspect that she's into heavy petting - at the very least. Now that your once-so-gentle son is fourteen, he has become loud, boisterous, and even rude at times. Your daughter is making low grades in school and her teachers tells

you that she isn't even trying." (The Surprising Years, 1985, p. 31). Thomas (1992) characterizes this stage as a laboratory in which adolescents are experimenting with different behaviors in search of who they are. The excerpts above, from a book written for parents by the National Quest Center, are examples of the types of situations faced by adolescents and parents during this stage. These behaviors are the result of a number of different feelings experienced by the adolescent

Vernon and Al-Mabuk (1995) report that adolescents at this stage of development are beginning to develop a more heightened sense of who they are and where they fit into the whole scheme of things. Because of the physical changes taking place, young adolescents are very vulnerable and their self-esteem swings like a pendulum. Exaggerated feelings of importance should not be mistaken for a good self-concept. Eventually, report Vernon and Al-Mabuk, these feelings give way to feelings of incompetence and unattractiveness.

Because feelings of inadequacy are so intense for early adolescents, they are very self-conscious. Elkind (1988) labels the assumption adolescents often have that everyone is looking at them the "imaginary audience". They spend hours choosing the perfect outfit or getting their hair to look like everyone else's hair. Elkind warns parents that as trivial and insignificant as these behaviors may appear to them, it is important to be sympathetic to what the adolescent is experiencing. "This stage will pass as adolescents formulate more abstract thinking skills and look beyond themselves and assume a broader perspective." (Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995, p. 110).

Social Development

"Now that your son is in middle school he has a whole new set of friends, and you haven't met any of them. You overhear your 13-year-old daughter call her 16-year-old brother a 'sosch.' What does that mean?" (The Surprising Years, 1985, p. 26). These and other situations, according to Thomas (1992), illustrate the adolescents' attempt to cut familiar ties and belong to a group.

Vernon and Al-Mabuk (1995), as well as Bluestein (1993), contend that belonging is the key issue for young adolescents. It is within this realm that teens begin to define what they need from their peer group. Do they need to be with the popular kids? Are they comfortable hanging around the "brainy" kids? Are they proud of the "jock" label? Whichever group they decide to identify with, their identity is quickly established and seemingly poor choices are difficult to discourage.

Parents may also notice at this stage that they have lost the role of the confidant. Friends become inseparable and often identical in terms of looks, attitude, and demeanor. Girls in particular develop very close relationships with other girls, but are also subject to what Vernon and Al-Mabuk (1995) call the "fickle friend" phenomenon - best friends one day and enemies the next. The super sensitivity discussed previously lends itself to a variety of conflicts between friends. Parents need to be aware of these conflicts and encourage their teenager to see things from both points of view.

Parents who feel abandoned by their teenager at this stage need to understand that appearances are more important to the adolescent than their actual feelings. It isn't cool for their parents to drive them to school, it's easier to

get along with their friends' parents, and they would absolutely die if they were ever seen with their parents in public. "While there may be some strain on the relationship during adolescence, parents who understand adolescent development realize that this strain is in part due to the 'letting go' process." (Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995, p. 113).

Emotional Development

"Your daughter comes home crying. The boy she has a crush on didn't look at her on the bus. You have a hard time hiding a chuckle. You come home and slap your son on the back as you always do, but he pulls away (The Surprising Years, 1985, p. 72)." During this stage, the ways that adolescents react to things on a day to day basis can range from funny to annoying. The temptation is to not take them seriously. Thomas (1992) urges parents learn to recognize these reactions as the result of the adolescent's emotional confusion.

Adolescent emotional development is characterized by a myriad of feelings. In addition to the occasional feelings of elation about a girl agreeing to "go with" a boy or a girl making eye contact with the guy of her dreams, adolescents experience a significant number of negative emotions during this stage of development. Feelings like guilt, shyness, embarrassment, shame, and anxiety can be overwhelming for most adolescents. As a result, they are often suppressed and become manifested in the form of anger. Again, parents need to realize that, although it may seem as though the anger is directed at them, it is a natural part of the development process and will eventually subside as the adolescent figures out how to effectively deal with the inner chaos they are experiencing (Vernon & Al-Mabuk, 1995).

Numerous contrasting feelings accompany an adolescent's emotional development (Curran, 1989). Adolescents are in search of the freedom they think they have earned, but are often fearful of the possibility of losing the security to which they have grown accustomed. There is also a longing to be independent and self-sufficient, but adolescents still seek direction and regulation. Finally, the approval of respected adults holds great importance for the adolescent, yet this time is also characterized by an increased sensitivity to any form of criticism.

The School Counselor as Consultant to Parents

Adolescence triggers some of the most numerous and intense changes in the physical, intellectual, self, social and emotional development of children. Unfortunately, many parents do not alter their parenting styles to meet the needs that occur as a result of these changes and consequently experience serious problems with their children. While there are parents who pursued some training when they were new parents, few follow up with formal parent education (Cruse, Carlson, & Kontos, 1981). For this reason, there are parents who are about to be presented with the greatest challenges of their parenting careers at a time when their skills are the most dated and perhaps least appropriate. It is at this point that many parents turn to school counselors for assistance (Cruse et. al., 1981). This assistance can take one of two forms: individual consultation or group parenting-skills training programs.

Individual Consultation

In a survey conducted by Cruse and his colleagues (1981), parents reported that the following areas were of the greatest concern for them: dealing

with aggression, setting limits, developing self-confidence in their children, improving the communication of the entire family and getting their children to assume responsibility. As a consultant, the school counselor can work individually with parents to identify the specific developmental needs of the student in an attempt to help them deal more effectively with the needs of their adolescents. Because school counselors have knowledge and training in many areas of human development and learning, they are able to present parents with a number of different strategies for dealing with adolescents at various stages of development. Dougherty (1990) notes that by collaborating with a consultee, in this case the parent, a joining of forces occurs which allows the counselor and parents to identify alternative solutions to a problem and allows the parents to accomplish specific tasks on their own.

By breaking the information down into each of the different developmental stages (physical, intellectual, self, social and emotional), the counselor and parents can develop specific strategies to address whatever is happening at the time of consultation. However, when it comes to the development of strategies, parents are looking for similarities between the things they have tried and the practices of other parents, which lends itself more to working in a group setting (Cruse et. al., 1981).

Group Consultation with Parents

Muro and Kottman (1995) identify four goals of parent group consultation:

1. Helping parents understand the part they play in influencing their child's behavior.

2. Helping parents learn procedures for improving parent-child relationships.
3. Enabling parents to get feedback on their ideas and methods of training children.
4. Helping parents to recognize that their problems in child rearing are not unique, but are shared in common with other parents, providing them the benefits of group thinking and mutual encouragement (p. 296).

The fourth goal illustrates a key component in group counseling: universalization. Parents are more comfortable addressing their concerns about their adolescent if they realize that they are not alone in their endeavor (Muro and Kottman, 1995). If the school counselor can develop a program that involves a group of parents who have similar concerns, parents will be better able to focus on practical and realistic solutions.

One of the school counselor's roles is to develop a program which (1) underscores the significance of communication between parents and their adolescent; (2) emphasizes the need for mutual respect on the part of both parties; and (3) stresses the importance of allowing young people to assume an increasing amount of responsibility for their own behavior as they mature (Hitchner, 1987).

Ritchie and Partin (1994) contend that the success of such a program lies in the abilities of the instructional leader to bring about behavioral changes in parents. The authors also state that individually-tailored programs tend to be most successful because they can be designed to meet the needs of the parents involved. The focus is on providing parents with the information regarding their

adolescents development so they can design their own techniques for helping them through their difficulties.

Before beginning a program, the counselor must determine the needs of the parents and design a program which addresses those needs. Hitchner (1987) offers three options for the counselor who is in the process of developing a parent education program. One option is to conduct an informal discussion group for parents where they can share concerns and solutions. This type of program, according to Hitchner, might be more responsive to the specific needs of the participants. However, because of the lack of structure, there is danger of too much time being devoted to one issue and not enough time to others.

A second approach is for the counselor to develop a structured program, incorporating developmental information with skill-building techniques. The characteristics of adolescent development described previously could be discussed. If this information is coupled with specific approaches for addressing issues in each stage, parents can develop clear strategies for dealing with adolescents. This approach, according to Hitchner (1987), has the advantage of being applicable to a specific population, and the disadvantage of taking up a lot of counselor time.

The third option is to use a prepackaged commercial program specifically directed toward parents of adolescents. The commercially-distributed programs like Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1987) and The Next STEP (Dinkmeyer, McKay, Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & McKay, 1989) allow the counselor to follow a systematic sequence of lessons

and materials. The popularity of such programs also adds to the credibility of the counselor.

Commercial Parent Education Programs

Clark, author of SOS! Help for Parents (1985) states, "There are as many training methods available as there are parents - the parents need to choose a program that fits with their parenting style as well as one that addresses the goals they would like to meet" (Clark, 1985, p. 2)." The following programs, while not necessarily developmental in nature, are designed to teach parents important skills needed for implementing the strategies they feel will be useful for them at home.

STEP

One popular program is *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting* (*STEP*), developed by Dinkmeyer and McKay (1987). This program is based on the idea that we are living in an era of social equality. The authors believe that it has become obsolete to discipline children with traditional reward and punishment systems. They developed this program to assist parents in learning effective ways to relate to their children. While parents can take the program and implement it themselves with their family, *STEP* is intended for study group use because groups are very effective in parent education.

The *STEP* program is divided into nine sessions which usually last one-and-a-half to two hours. Each session begins with an overview of what the parents will be learning. From there, participants discuss the previous week's activities and the assigned readings, watch and discuss video presentations,

engage in role-plays, and summarize their impressions of the session (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1987).

The first session is spent getting acquainted with the leader and the other parents in the group. The leader also explains the goals and expectations of the program. Handouts and posters are explained, and, if pertinent, fees are discussed. In the second session, parents deal with emotions and the four goals of misbehavior; attention, power, revenge, and display of inadequacy. In the third session, parents learn the difference between encouragement and praise and how to effectively use each. The fourth session is devoted to teaching parents some important listening skills. The topic of the fifth session is family communication. Parents learn more effective ways to talk to their children. In the sixth and seventh sessions, parents are introduced to a method of discipline the fosters responsibility - natural and logical consequences. The eighth session is spent talking about the importance of regular family meetings. The ninth and final session is conducted with the intent of giving the parents a boost of confidence in their newly acquired abilities (Lindberg, 1989).

The Next STEP

The second example of a program for use in teaching parenting skills is the follow-up to the *STEP* program, *The Next STEP*, also developed by Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989). While this program is built on the *STEP* program, it goes a step further and teaches parents to take an in-depth look at their beliefs and attitudes about parenting. This, according to Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989), helps parents apply the lessons from the *STEP* program more effectively. Skills

are included in this program that help the parents increase their self-awareness and improve the relationship with their children.

The main difference between *The Next STEP* and the *STEP* program is that the former focuses more on the problem solving process than the latter. Parents help one another come up with new ways of looking at problems and find positive ways of looking at the challenges they are all facing. In *The Next STEP*, parents are not receiving as much formal instruction. Instead, they are considered a problem-solving support group designed to help each other identify new ways of applying what was learned in *STEP*.

Specific objectives of *The Next STEP* include (a) to learn to apply *STEP* concepts and skills more effectively, (b) to gain new information and skills to improve relationships with children, (c) to share and receive help with individual parenting concerns, (d) to discover ways of building a child's self-esteem, (e) to examine how lifestyle beliefs may be affecting parenting, and (f) to learn to control the situation, not the child (Lisovskis, 1987).

The usefulness and practicality of these models, according to the authors, make them very appropriate in a number of settings, including school. However, Clark (1985) warns against jumping head first into such groups. "Educational groups like the *STEP* and *The Next STEP* are excellent and highly recommended programs, but only if the school has the time and energy to implement such a program (Clark, 1985, p. 241)." Utilization of one of these programs has the advantage of requiring little preparation on the part of the counselor. It is important, however, that any prepackaged program be screened to be sure it meets the specific goals of the counselor and the parents.

Conclusion

Developmental problems, such as searching for identity or seeking to become more independent, are often increased by the parents' lack of understanding of the many changes their adolescents are undergoing. Therefore, it is important that parents understand the normalcy of the behaviors they are noticing in their changing adolescents as well as what they are experiencing physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally.

According to Kistner (1988), elementary and middle schools effectively help children through developmental stages and learning processes when they win the support from parents. By the same token, this support is facilitated by schools that offer assistance to parents. Because of the difficult changes facing today's adolescents, notes Kistner, parenting has become an uncertain and complex venture. Programs to assist and support parents in this process are an essential part of the school counselor's role. In addition to presenting information at PTA meetings and sending communications home, school counselors can take an active role in assisting parents by offering parent education opportunities.

One thing the school counselor can do is provide parents with the information they need to effectively deal with their teenagers' changing behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. By consulting and collaborating with parents, the school counselor can offer alternatives for parents to design their own solutions. The challenge is for the counselor to design and provide a suitable program for educating parents.

Parent education programs use different formats and structures depending on the nature of the group, the training and expertise of the school counselor and

the leader's style and preference for particular types of groups. There are typically two approaches from which to choose: individual or group consultation programs designed by the school counselor and commercially distributed programs which teach systematic and sequential parenting skills.

Whatever method the school counselor chooses to assist parents in becoming less worried and confused about their adolescent, it is important to stress that the majority of changes they encounter are normal. But perhaps of even greater importance when working with parents is letting them know that the feelings they are experiencing as a result of their adolescent's growth are as normal as the growth itself.

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