



Brad Sachs, Ph.D. Good Enough Teens *Promoting Self-Reliance*

Dr. Brad Sachs is a psychologist, educator, consultant and best-selling author. In April 2013, he spoke to the Common Ground audiences about his two recent books, Emptying The Nest: Launching Your Young Adult Toward Success and Self-Reliance and The Good Enough Teen: How To Raise Adolescents With Love and Acceptance (Despite How Impossible They Can Be). The parentheses added to his book title are telling – Dr. Sachs writes and speaks with humor, good sense and clinical wisdom. He incorporates real-life vignettes to highlight what he terms “loving accountability” for both teens and their families.

Dr. Sachs begins with a challenge to parents: Learn to have an imperfect family and be perfectly satisfied. “*The only predictable and explicable aspect of raising teens is how unpredictable and inexplicable they can be,*” he says. Dr. Sachs firmly reminds parents, “*Your teen is not YOUR teen.*” While we may have a desire to sculpt the child of our dreams – these kids are not here to do our bidding – they are here to become themselves. What you see with your teen is what you are likely to get, and therefore, as parents, we need to reflect back to them a vision of themselves at their finest. Meet your child where they are and paint the bull’s-eye *around* them, rather than attempting to make your child move to accommodate the bull’s-eye that you have set up.

Adolescence should be a preparation for adulthood, not a performance for adults – whether on the athletic field, in the classroom, or on the stage, it is not your teen’s JOB to perform/gratify/entertain you – they need to figure out what THEY like to do and to determine how much of what they’re doing is because of you and how much is because of them and their passion. Many kids are oppressed, not depressed – we need to make a distinction between discomfort and diagnosis. As parents, we need to remember that not every problem has an ideal solution, and not every question has a concrete answer. “*Life’s most important lessons are learned, not taught; discovered not imposed,*” says Dr. Sachs.

Dr. Sachs acknowledges that all parental emotions are normal and acceptable. Parenting involves a hybrid of emotions, and as parents, we have to learn to handle the broader bandwidth of emotions so our children can do the same. Remember, teens need us the most when they are the least pleasant to be with. Adding insult to injury, they *don’t like* the fact that they need us, so we have to summon our compassion and remember that adolescence can be nightmarish, but almost everyone wakes up and moves on.

One neglected aspect of teen development is that it is a time of tremendous grief. Every adolescent is in mourning, needing to say goodbye to childhood in order to prepare for adulthood. Their words, “I’m a loser” translates to “I’m losing my childhood.” Bad news: We don’t speak the language of grief in our society. Good news: When we, as parents, begin to speak that language, our teen will start to bloom.

Dr. Sachs stresses the concept of ‘good enough parenting’ - it’s not what you have and what you do, but who you are and how you love that matters. Moreover, as children grow, it’s not ultimately what you say, but how well you say it and how well you listen, that determines your influence as a parent. Good enough parents: have compassion for their teen’s passions; are honest and empathic about the difficulty and unfairness of growth and change; become increasingly comfortable with disappointing their teen; focus on modeling instead of lecturing; and keep the emphasis on transforming instead of performing.

EMBRACING YOUR GOOD ENOUGH TEEN:

- STAGE ONE – Be aware of the conscious (i.e. they had better not make the mistakes we made; they had better do what our parents made us do) and subconscious (i.e. they must heal our relationships with our parents, they must reflect well on us and validate us; they must make us immortal) expectations we place on our children.
- STAGE TWO – Acknowledge that when our teens can't/don't meet all these expectations – we all fall into patterns of reacting: Hyper-parenting; hyper-criticalness; over-anxious; self-blaming; blaming others/spouses; blaming the teen or angry withdrawal. All the good things that our kids do are not important because they are not doing what we want them to do.
- STAGE THREE – We have to JOIN with our teenager to help them solve problems. Also, we need to look at their behavior through the lens of which problem are they attempting to solve. Is it a socially-based problem, an emotionally-based problem, a family-based problem or an identity-based problem? Teens' problem solving is guided by philosophical platforms like... “It's important for me to be seen as helpless so not too much is expected of me”; “I can't stop acting angry or everybody will think I've forgotten all the terrible things that have happened to me”; “If I can't solve the problem on my own, then I will have failed”; “I don't want to admit that they were right”; “I'm still too angry at my parents to make them proud of me.”
- STAGE FOUR – Your main job at this stage is to be left behind, so you must act as their BEACON and their MIRROR – let them know who they CAN/MAY become and also REFLECT back at them an image of them as a person of value/worth. Allow your teen opportunities to succeed and fail without rescuing them. Work in partnership with your teen, gradually sharing power.
- STAGE FIVE – Recognize that teens may not change until parents change. Not all growth is visible; yet optimistically predicting growth increases the likelihood of growth. And sometimes you have to change the reason for changing if change is going to come about.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR TEEN:

Parent/teen conversations should be designed to attract adolescents' curiosity about who they are and what they do so that they begin to discover a sense of meaning and purpose behind their actions. When a “Curiosity Dialogue” is done well, it results in the teen having hope for the future and an increased resolve to change and grow rather than immobilizing feelings of shame, guilt and self-loathing. It's ALL IN THE DELIVERY – being more receptive to and interested in the teen's experience than s/he is. Letting your teen know: “I am here and I hear you”; “I care about you”; “I respect your point of view”; “I want to understand you and will hang in there in an effort to do so”; and asks, “What were you trying to accomplish when you acted as you did?”; “What alternatives presented themselves?”; “How did you decide which alternative to pursue?”; “How did you feel about your choice and how did it work out?”; and “What would you do differently next time?”

Adolescents are preoccupied with questions of purpose... to know that their life has meaning; to connect the meaning of their lives with the meaning of other individuals' lives; to connect that meaning with the universe as a whole. EVERY adolescent is asking: “Why am I here?” “What's the point?” As parents of these teens, we want to help them make sense of, and grow from, the pain they have to endure and to help them understand and be grateful for the sources of wonder and joy in their lives.

Common Ground Speaker Series

www.commongroundspeakerseries.org