



## Positive parenting: Get past teen stereotypes

Too many parents focus on the negative, according to Richard M. Lerner

**TODAY books**

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*When it comes to adolescents, too many parents are quick to focus on what they do wrong. That's a big mistake, says author Richard M. Lerner in his new book, "The Good Teen." An excerpt.*

### **It is a mistake to embrace the stereotype**

Think about it: when was the last time you heard a parent praise his or her teenager? When was the last time you did? Most likely you're like Nancy. Whenever she met a friend in the library who asked how Donna was doing, Nancy would immediately say, "Forgetful and inconsiderate, as always." If she was asked to describe Eric, the first things she thought of were what a slob he could be and how he often lost track of time — as if these constituted his entire personality rather than just two aspects of it. Only during rare moments, such as during her conversation with Rob, was she able to stop dwelling on her children's faults and see their strengths.

Sometimes I am convinced that many parents do not even have a useful vocabulary to describe teens who aren't "troubled." Although we're comfortable acknowledging academic achievement (usually in the form of school grades), when it comes to other aspects of their lives, we mostly describe "good" kids as either those who have learned to manage or cope with their shortcomings or ones who don't have problems. That is, we resort to negatives: good kids don't do drugs, don't hang out with the wrong crowd, and don't engage in risky behavior.

To many parents, the absence of bad things is the definition of a good kid. They think, "My child is doing well because she's not in trouble." Do we even have enough words to depict all the important, valuable, admirable, and positive things that a young person can do?

Have we forgotten how to affirm their positive characteristics? This collective amnesia is more serious than you may at first realize. Our lack of vocabulary isn't innocuous — it's a symptom of a much larger public and scientific problem that has serious implications, both for individual teenagers and for our society at large. By focusing our conversations with friends on risks and dangers, and by our fascination with reading the incessant media accounts that emphasize the negatives of the teen years, we've implicitly accepted a theory of adolescence that's based on deficits. When we view teenagers as deficient — as if something's wrong with or missing from them — it affects them. Acknowledging our low expectations, hearing nothing but their shortcomings, they feel vulnerable. Ultimately, they may come to believe that it is inevitable that they will become involved in problematic or dangerous behavior. They may incorporate the sense of actually being "at risk" as living only a step away from getting in trouble or creating problems for others, whether it involves taking drugs, dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, or getting caught up in violent behavior.

Imagine if everywhere you turned people thought poorly of you — if every time you read an article or saw a TV news report about people your age, you realized that no one expected very much of you. Surrounded by these impressions, it wouldn't take long for you to feel burdened by the incessant accusations and suspicions. Some teens become convinced that their parents are just waiting to discover incriminating evidence or are always on the verge of asking invasive and accusatory questions: "Are you smoking cigarettes? Are you smoking dope? Are you having sex?"

What a dispiriting, disheartening outlook! Teens who grow up in this atmosphere can have their self-esteem deflated, their motivation and spirit dampened. After all, when people don't expect the best of us, we often respond in kind.

Sheila, for example, wanted her fourteen-year-old son, Andy, to help out with household chores. Since he loved their cat, Star, Sheila asked her son to be responsible for cleaning out the kitty litter box twice a week. At first, he was fairly responsible. But after a couple of weeks, Sheila found herself having to remind him. Within a month, she was nagging him all the time.

One day Andy was in the kitchen and overheard his mother on the phone talking to a friend, complaining about what a pain it was to constantly remind Andy to do his chores. "I'm sorry that I ever asked him to do this," he heard his mother say. "We always end up yelling at each other. But what I'm really worried about is that he doesn't know how to be responsible. He has to learn that life's not all play, that sometimes we have to do chores that we don't enjoy."

Andy waited until later that evening to say to his mom, "I heard you on the phone, and you have it all wrong. It's not that I don't want to help out around the house — it's just that I hate doing the kitty litter. I can't stand the smell."

Sheila was speechless. She'd known since he was a baby that Andy was very sensitive to smells. Of course it made sense that being in charge of changing the litter was not the best chore for him. After talking with him and asking about his preferences, they decided together that Andy would do the laundry. And because he had no natural aversion to this job, Sheila almost never had to remind him to do it.

But what also struck Sheila most painfully was how quickly she'd assumed that Andy had just been defiant and oppositional ... because that's how teenagers are supposed to act. They're supposed to rebel, to resist doing chores, or doing anything their parents ask of them. They look for any opportunity to turn a discussion into an argument, and leave their parents no choice but to nag. Because Sheila accepted everything she'd heard about teenagers at face value, she never thought to wonder if there was another reason for Andy's behavior beyond "being a teenager."

### **Why the deficit model is deficient**

The negative implications of relying on a deficit model of teenage development involves more than disheartening individual adolescents and misleading their parents; it also leeches into decisions we make as a society. If we view teens as "broken," then it's our responsibility to "fix" them. This thinking explains the plethora of governmental and private programs designed to help teens who are in trouble, or to prevent problems from developing. Of course, some teens do have problems that require us to act. There are also situations in life that can and should be prevented. But today's governmental policies and social programs designed to address deficits are flawed in two ways.

First, problems are not the whole story. Focusing on a single "bad" behavior instead of placing it in the context of the whole person is like substituting a piece of a jigsaw puzzle for the completed picture. When we allow ourselves to become caught up in analyzing any single behavior, we never seem to find the time to consider the individual's totality. In this way, many of today's programs fall seriously short.

Second, these programs have not been very successful. Despite the hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars — your money and mine — spent each year on problem prevention or problem remediation, the problems are by and large still with us. Although the numbers are decreasing slightly, kids are still taking drugs (although the drug of choice does seem to change periodically), still dropping out of school (especially in urban areas and among kids of color), still engaged in gang- and/or drug-related crime and violence, and still far too often getting pregnant and having babies. While there are some drug- and pregnancy-prevention programs that do help, the vast majority of programs have shown no convincing evidence of their effectiveness.

Because society has not spent enough time identifying factors that apply to teenagers who aren't at risk, or agreeing on the positive characteristics we would like to see all young people possess, we do not have good tools to fully evaluate the programs or social policies that are aimed at promoting positive change. We can't measure what we haven't named.

We need to think about spending tax dollars not just on fixing problems or on preventing them. We should think — as a society and as parents — about how to promote healthy, positive, admirable, and productive behaviors in our young people. And we need to find a new vocabulary to talk about our young people. Let's name the good things they can and should do. Let's measure these good things. Let's then find ways to make those good things more likely to be present in their lives.

We already have a few words to describe teenagers who are doing well, though as I mentioned earlier, we tend to reserve these for those youth who do well academically, in sports, or at their jobs. But when we talk about teens being good students, talented quarterbacks, or conscientious employees, we're still just talking about a very small portion of their behavior. What about the sense of themselves as competent and able

people? What about their moral compass, their integrity, and their sense of spirituality? What about their social relationships, not just with you and their friends but, as well, with their teachers, coaches, mentors, and members of their community?

Also, what about their compassion for those who have less than they do, their sense of caring, and their belief in a just world? And what about their commitment to keep themselves on the right track, to contribute to their own health and success and to the wellbeing of their family, community, and society?

We need words to describe all these characteristics of young people. We need to begin to talk about our teens by using these words, and we need to insist that policies and programs strive to identify, measure, and promote these important characteristics, as well as fix and prevent problems. Only then will we be able to think about teenagers as complete persons: living their lives every day, taking into account their strengths along with their weaknesses, weighing all they do wrong against all they get right. They're not problems to be fixed but resources to be developed. They're not immature or incomplete adults who need constant constraint and direction, but are active partners in their own positive transition to adulthood.

After all, as parents, this is how we thought of our children throughout every earlier stage of their lives. When they were infants, toddlers, and young children, we knew our role: to guide them through their developmental challenges to achieve mastery. We wanted nothing more than to see them walk, learn to use the toilet, build their vocabularies. We helped them achieve those goals, collaboratively. We thought of them as full of potential, capable of growing in positive ways with our loving guidance. They still are.

*Excerpted from "The Good Teen," by Richard M. Lerner, Ph.D. Copyright (c) 2007, reprinted with permission from Random House.*

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