

Parenting GIFTED ADOLESCENTS

Gifted Child Today; 3/22/2001; Griffin, Glenda L.

Raising gifted adolescents is complicated. There are many ideas put forth by researchers, parents, theorists, ministers, and others concerning how best to meet the needs of this population. Some ideas seem quite clear, while others contradict one another. If our gifted adolescents came with instruction manuals, it would be much easier to parent effectively and confidently. Unfortunately, no such manuals exist.

My knowledge and familiarity with gifted students is derived from my research and experiences about these special students. I have written about gifted students and presented papers on the topic at state and national conventions (Davalos & Griffin, 1999a; Davalos & Griffin, 1999b; Johnsen, Haensly, Ryser, Ford, Christian, Davalos, Griffin, Purdy, & Witte, 1997). I stay abreast of current trends and readings on adolescent development as part of my preparation for teaching child and adolescent development classes. I am also an instructor of honors students and work with gifted students as they move from adolescence to young adulthood. As director of a summer career-exploration program, I experience first-hand some of the interesting ideas, identities, and actions adolescents display as they live and study away from home. Parenting two successful adolescents has also increased my expertise in the day-to-day lives of gifted young people.

From a variety of perspectives, I feel qualified to offer suggestions regarding gifted adolescents. In this discussion I will propose a list of ideas that I believe have merit in parenting gifted adolescents. Some are taken from research in gifted education, some from texts on child and adolescent development, and some from my own experiences with students in my summer program, my honors college students, and my own children.

Say Yes as Often as Possible

Adolescents need to feel that parents trust them and believe that they will make the right decisions or perform the right actions should decisions or actions become necessary. Decision-making abilities improve over the course of adolescence, with young people gaining skills in looking ahead, assessing risks, considering outcomes of alternative choices, recognizing that one's advice might be tainted by one's own interests, and recognizing the value of turning to an independent expert in certain situations (Steinberg, 1999). Adolescents improve decision-making skills by experiencing the rewards and consequences of decisions made. When parents say no to every activity in which their adolescent wants to be involved, the adolescent comes to feel that his or her parents don't believe him or her to be capable and responsible. It then becomes difficult for the adolescent to develop the identity of a competent, capable self. Saying no also denies adolescents opportunities to practice decision-making skills in safe environments. Decision making is less momentous and risky with parents there to help should that help become necessary.

If parents can say yes to most things, when they feel they have to say no, the no really means something. The adolescent will know this is an important issue, and is more likely to respect the parental decision.

I've always felt that my son kept an invisible scorecard. Whenever I said yes to something he wanted to do, I earned a point. Points added up. When I felt somewhat hesitant, I would often go ahead with the yes, saying, for example, "I'm a little worried about you driving all the way to -- for

the ballgame, but since you have been a responsible driver, I'm going to let you do it." This kind of response earned extra points because it signified my belief in his ability to deal with a difficult task. When I felt I had to say no, I would say something like, "I let you drive to the game in --, but this week's game is just too far. I just can't let you do it." Because he could not do as he had hoped, points would be deducted from the scorecard, but because I had points on the credit side, and he knew I felt strongly about this issue, he would usually accept my decision without an argument.

Give Adolescents Choices

Along with saying yes as often as possible comes the importance of giving adolescents choices. This allows young adolescents some control over their own lives, which is extremely important as they strive to become autonomous people. It also allows them to see the natural consequences following decisions they have made.

An interesting scene took place at a near-by table in a Disney World restaurant, involving two parents and a young adolescent. After eating a portion of her meal, the young adolescent announced that she was ready to go to the theme parks. One parent declared that they would not go until she ate more of her food. The young adolescent refused. Twenty minutes later, the family still sat, each member with arms crossed, refusing to look at or speak to one another. I feel that if the parents had given their daughter choices, the situation would have been resolved easily or may not have occurred at all. This young adolescent's defiance wasn't about food; it was about her growing need for autonomy.

Provide Opportunities for Career Exploration

Adolescence is a time when young people begin to develop a sense of purpose, a clarification of long-term plans and values, and a growing sense of who they are and where they are heading. Erik Erikson (1959, 1963, 1968), an influential theorist in the area of identity development, suggested that the major psychosocial issue of adolescence revolves around an "identity crisis." According to Erikson, adolescents need time to engage in identity exploration and experimentation. This seems particularly true for gifted adolescents. These students are often very talented in several areas and are sometimes rushed prematurely into choosing one area of concentration at the expense of all others. We, as parents, need to provide opportunities for career explorations, and we must not over-invest in our children's gifts, making choices that are our own and not our child's.

Attending a career-exploration program provides students with opportunities to "fall in love" with a course of study or to eliminate an area from future exploration. I am reminded of Kristen, an extremely bright student who came to our program to explore "Horse Medicine" as a possible career choice. One day I found Kristen sitting in the hall outside the classroom. In the lab, one group of students was examining horses' teeth to determine age and diet. Other students, wearing rubber gloves, were examining horse tendons, ligaments, and muscles. As I left the classroom, Kristen said, "I thought that I wanted to become a large animal veterinarian, but I can't stand the sights or smells in the lab." It was better for Kristen to learn this before she put years, money, and energy into veterinary training.

Allow Adolescents to Try on Different Personalities

Adolescence is a time for learning more about who one is, a time for forming a personal identity. For many adolescents, this involves trying on different looks, images, and patterns of behavior.

Parents need to be tolerant during this experimental stage. Healthy individuation is fostered by close family relationships in which parents encourage adolescents to develop and assert individuality (Steinberg, 1999). Over-reacting to bleached hair, a shaved head, or a pierced belly button may shut down experimentation necessary in establishing a coherent sense of self.

One summer, I attended Parents' Night at my son's summer camp. Part of the program included a gallery of photographs shot in and around the campus by students concentrating on photography. Imagine my surprise upon seeing numerous photographs of my normally clean-cut preppy son, each depicting a teenager in baggy tank tops and parachute pants, wearing a blue bandana around his head! That persona was not chosen long-term; my son returned home to spend his next few years in a baseball cap.

Help Adolescents Develop Moral Thinking

Along with the development of behavioral and emotional autonomy, adolescents develop value autonomy, the most researched aspect to date being that of moral development (Steinberg, 1999). According to Lawrence Kohlberg's (1976) theory of moral development, adolescence is a time of potential shifting from a morality that defines right and wrong based on society's rules to one that defines right and wrong based on one's own basic moral principles. This shift usually occurs in late adolescence or early adulthood, although for some people, not at all.

Davis and Rimm (1998) wrote, "As a general trend, gifted students are more sensitive to values and moral issues" (pp. 34-35). They are able to see others' points of view, acknowledge others' rights, behave fairly, and empathize with others' feelings and problems. These researchers state, "gifted students are likely to develop, refine, and internalize a system of values and a keen sense of fair play and justice at a relatively early age" (p. 34). Gifted youngsters may also evaluate others, including parents, according to the high standards they have set for themselves.

Hollingworth (1942) described a different, not-so-moral tendency in some gifted youth to engage in benign chicanery. These students use intelligence to avoid disagreeable tasks, academic or other, and to get their own way with peers and parents. If gifted adolescents are to change this negative behavior, Hollingworth felt that the behavior, and its consequences for others, must be made explicit (Delisle, 1992). If not changed, this benign chicanery could progress to delinquency and crime, especially when the talents of gifted youngsters are rewarded by money or status by a misconduct-oriented group (Parker, 1979). Parents are the most influential factor for their children in the development of moral values (Steinberg, 1999). They must provide support for gifted adolescents as they work out personal value systems. They must be available to talk through moral dilemmas, be flexible when an adolescent exhibits inconsistent values, and be effective as models of highly evolved moral systems themselves. Exposure to moral arguments at a slightly higher level than the one on which the child is typically operating is an effective way to help youngsters move to higher levels of moral reasoning (Boyes & Allen, 1993; Speicher, 1994; Walker ex: Taylor, 1991). Participation in family discussions in which the conflict level is neither extremely high nor extremely low is important. Because prosocial behaviors are in direct opposition to aggressive and antisocial behaviors, parents need to provide opportunities for involvement in such activities. Participating in mission trips with church groups, building homes with Habitat for Humanity, and serving in soup kitchens are ways in which families can work together in prosocial experiences.

Be Your Adolescent's Excuse for Resisting Unhealthy and Antisocial Behaviors

Peers become extremely important and influential during early adolescence, and this influence continues through middle adolescence (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Peer pressure for antisocial behavior is influential, especially for males. During adolescence, there is a dramatic increase in the sheer amount of time young people spend with peers, in the relative time they spend in the company of peers versus adults, and in the amount of time they spend with peers outside adult supervision (Steinberg, 1999). There is strong peer influence at a time when young people are trying to gain emotional, behavioral, and value autonomy. Adolescents do not want to lose face in front of peers.

When an adolescent refuses to do something that peers want to do, she may lose friendships because of the refusal. When an adolescent refuses to do something because "my parents will kill me if they see me smoking a cigarette, drinking alcohol, or getting a tattoo," peers can understand. Let your adolescent know that you will be their scapegoat anytime they feel it necessary.

Allow Time for Peer Relationships

It may seem as if your adolescent has friends over, is spending time with friends elsewhere, or is on the phone talking with friends 24 hours-a-day. Peer relationships serve a valuable purpose, yet, "have their origins in the biological, cognitive, and social transitions of adolescence" (Steinberg, 1999, p. 161). Peers may influence behavior negatively, as well as positively.

Parker and Gottman (1989) stated that it is through gossip with friends that young people learn to carry out basic, social reciprocities and information exchanges that are crucial to friendships. When cultural norms for violence, aggression, and friendship are at issue, gossip reaffirms the norm for acceptable behavior (Cole & Cole, 1996). When topics not covered by clear cultural norms emerge in conversations, young people use gossip to find out what friends think about this issue and then act accordingly. This is why it is so important that parents know their adolescent's choice in friends.

Begin when your children are young, let kids congregate in your house, and continue this practice through adolescence. This doesn't involve much time or expense on your part. Prerequisites include a full refrigerator, plenty of sleeping bags, and a fairly relaxed attitude about housekeeping. The youngsters will quickly become comfortable around you and will talk about almost everything in your presence. This is a great way to keep in touch with who and what's going on in your child's world.

Peer group participation fosters the ability to communicate one's ideas to others, understand others' points of view, and get along with one another. Because Dr. William Nash appreciated the importance of talking and listening to peers as a major contributor to young people's understanding of the world, he named his summer career-exploration program the Youth Adventure Program (YAP). He referred to the students as Yappers. The 1996 YAP brochure stated that while "professors might do some lecturing to introduce concepts and principles, the major emphasis would be given to `discussing (yapping) and doing' as a strategy for engaging students in the investigative process."

Find Time to Talk With Your Adolescent

In this busy world we live in, it is hard to find time to really talk with your adolescent. With cheerleading practice, one-act plays, and study groups usurping family time, parents have to

create opportunities to talk with their adolescents. Family time becomes less available as adolescents grow older, yet it is important to continue to transmit and reinforce family values, to serve as a sounding-board for your child, and to model good decision-making strategies. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) proposed that when teenagers socialize with friends, discussions center around sports, relationships, gossip, and joking around. When adolescents talk with family members, the talk is often about more serious issues such as college, work, and the state of the world. They say, "talking with the family involves participation within the parents' world of discourse, a world which is presumably more rational and goal-oriented than the one shared with peers" (p. 103).

As our son grew older, I found that he and I talked more about important issues one-on-one when his dad was gone on business trips. When my husband was away, I often stayed up later at night and slept later in the morning. This sleep pattern closely matched that of my son. It allowed us some quiet time after my daughter had fallen asleep, friends had gone home, and homework was done. Often we talked from midnight to 2 or 3 a.m. Although this schedule might not seem optimal, it was a time that worked best for my son. Losing a little sleep meant nothing when compared to the value of time spent together ... talking, listening, and sharing with one another.

Establish Close Family Relationships

Studies suggest that adolescents are likely to be influenced by parents on long-term questions such as those concerning education, occupation, values, religion, and ethics (Brittain, 1963; Young & Ferguson, 1979). Effective parenting revolves around close family relationships. Parents who encourage individuation together with emotional closeness help adolescents become autonomous individuals. Parents with enabling behaviors accept their adolescents as valuable family contributors and help them develop their own ideas through questions, explanations, and the tolerance of differences of opinion (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Hauser, Powers, & Noam, 1991; Hauser & Safyer, 1994). These parents establish guidelines and set and uphold standards for their adolescent's behavior, but, at the same time, they are flexible, open to discussion, and willing to explain their own reasoning. This authoritative parenting, with its flexibility and give-and-take quality, is well-suited for a child's transition into adolescence and then into adulthood. Gradual adjustments in family relations take place as the adolescent takes on more responsibility and independence, but family ties remain close (Vuchinich, Angeletti, & Gatherum, 1996). Most adolescents growing up in these warm, supportive environments successfully move from adolescence to adulthood with few crises.

The setting of curfews might serve as an example. When I was young, my parents set early curfews that remained the same regardless of the occasion, my age, or my level of responsibility. Missing the curfew by five minutes or more resulted in grounding. No excuses were tolerated. With my own children, curfews were discussed and set by parents and children together, taking into account the occasion, ages and responsibility levels, people involved, location of the event, and other things specific to the occasion. As my children moved into adolescence, definitive curfews were no longer set. Our adolescents were required to write locations and phone numbers at which they could be reached. If they changed locations, they would call home with the new information. There were only a couple of times when this system created problems for us or our children. There were hundreds of times when this system, developed through discussion, trust, and openness, worked effectively.

Summary

Effective parents encourage their adolescents to have peer relationships, while at the same time to monitor relationships to ensure that time is spent with appropriate peers engaging in behaviors consistent with cultural norms. They serve as their child's excuse for resisting peer pressure toward inappropriate behaviors. Effective parents guide and support adolescents as they begin individuation, giving them opportunities to practice adult-like skills and behaviors in a safe environment. They give adolescents choices, allowing them to experience natural consequences and rewards. They have high expectations, provide opportunities for career exploration, and allow their adolescents to try out different personalities as they search for personal identities. Through modeling and discussion, they help adolescents develop personal systems of right and wrong. With the biological, social, and behavioral changes that occur in adolescence, the most important role for parents is to support adolescents as they attempt to develop individual identities and gain emotional, behavioral, and value autonomy.

References

- Allen, J., Hauser, S., Bell, K., & O'Connor, T. (1994). Longitudinal assessment of autonomy and relatedness in adolescent-family interactions as predictors of adolescent ego development and self-esteem. *Child Development, 65*, 179-194.
- Boyes, M., & Allen, S. (1993). Styles of parent-child interaction and moral reasoning in adolescence. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 39*, 551-570.
- Brittain, C. (1963). Adolescent choices and parent/peer crosspressures, *American Sociological Review, 28*, 385-391.
- Cole, M., & Cole, S. R. (1996). *The development of children (3rd ed.)*. New York: Freeman.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Larson, R. (1984). *Being adolescent: Conflict and growth in the teenage years*. U.S.A.: Basic Books.
- Davalos, R., & Griffin, G. L. (1999a). Empowering teachers and students to change through shared language. *Education, 119*, 542-550.
- Davalos, R., & Griffin, G. L. (1999b). The impact of teachers' individualized practices on gifted students in rural, heterogeneous classrooms. *Roeper Review, 21*, 308-314.
- Davis, G. A., & Rimm, S. B. (1998). *Education of the gifted and talented (4th ed.)*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Delisle, J. R. (1992). *Guiding the social and emotional development of gifted youth*. New York: Longman.
- Erikson, E. (1959). Identity and the life cycle. *Psychological Issues, 1*, 1-171.
- Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Hauser, S., Powers, S., & Noam, G. (1991). *Adolescents and their families*. New York: Free Press.

Hauser, S., & Safyer, A. (1994). Ego development and adolescent emotions. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 4, 487-502.

Hollingworth, L. S. (1942). *Children above 180 IQ. Stanford Binet: Origin and development.* Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: World Book.

Johnsen, S., Haensly, P., Ryser, G., Ford, R., Christain, V., Davalos, R., Griffin, G., Purdy, J., & Witte, M., (1997). Adapting the elementary classroom for gifted students. *Tempo*, 17(1), 23-25.

Kohlberg, L. (1976). Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive development approach. In T. Lickona (Ed.), *Moral development and behavior.* New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Parker, M. (1979, September/October). Bright kids in trouble with the law. *G/C/T*, 62-63.

Parker, J. G., & Gottman, J. M. (1989). Social and emotional development in a relational context: Friendship interactions from early childhood to adolescence. In T. J. Berndt & G. W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships in child development.* New York: Wiley.

Speicher, B. (1994). Family patterns of moral judgment during adolescence and early adulthood. *Developmental Psychology*, 30, 624-632.

Steinberg, L. (1999). *Adolescence* (5th ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill.

Steinberg, L., & Silverberg, S. (1986). The vicissitudes of autonomy in early adolescence. *Child Development*, 57, 841-851.

Vuchinich, S., Angeletti, J., & Gatherum, A. (1996). Context and development in family problem solving with preadolescent children. *Child Development*, 67, 1276-1288.

Walker, L., & Taylor, J. (1991). Family interaction and the development of moral reasoning. *Child Development*, 62, 264-283.

Young, H., & Ferguson, L. (1979). Developmental changes through adolescence in the spontaneous nomination of reference groups as a function of decision context. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 8, 239-252.

Glenda L. Griffin, Ph.D., is the director of the Youth Adventure Program, a career exploration camp for gifted junior- and senior-high students and a lecturer at Texas A&M University, teaching honors courses in the educational psychology department. She may be reached at Institute for the Gifted and Talented, Department of Educational Psychology, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4225; (409) 862-6514; e-mail: glendag@pop.tamu.edu.

COPYRIGHT 2001 Prufrock Press