

Parent Update on Adolescent Psychology: The Parent Version

The recent PTO/B-PEN presentation by parenting expert Joani Geltman discussed adolescent development and navigating tricky conversations with teenagers. With humor and compassion, she offered insight into what is happening in your child's brain during moments of heightened emotion and disproportionate reactions that can cross boundaries and push parents' buttons. She also offered strategies for how to communicate in ways both compassionate and effective.

Key Takeaways

- ** During the teen years, the rapidly **developing brain's amygdala (emotional center) is at its highest activation**, like a volcano just waiting for something to cause it to explode. Adolescents are experiencing **overload** – new feelings, new thoughts, new friends, new worries – complicated by today's world, which is a scary place, and they feel unsafe, feel anxiety, agitation, loss of control.
- ** Their **overreactions** to things can seem personal, and shifts in your relationship can feel like a loss, but don't feed into heightened emotion – stay **calm and objective**.
- ** Behavior can contradict what teens are actually feeling – **vulnerability is hard** for them. Anger is an easier emotion than sadness/introspection/fear. But rather than responding emotionally, **de-escalate** in calm voice (“you seem upset today”) and **validate** that they may be having a reaction they can't control. **It's not what you say, it's how you say it.**
- ** In opening conversations, think about what your goal is when asking questions (get information, gauge emotion, etc.) **Lead with curiosity/interest**, not lecturing or interrogating, and encourage self-reflection, problem solving. Listen for cues to get to subtext of feelings.
- ** They are thinking about relationships in ways they haven't before. They are trying on different personalities as part of identity development – it's a **time for separation and individuation**, finding their own path.
- ** **Arguing more is developmentally appropriate** as they analyze and process information.
 - “Gotcha” argument
 - Kids notice parents aren't perfect and that gives them power, may start being sarcastic, sound mean, disrespectful, push your buttons
 - Take away that power of hurting your feelings – hug them, make it into a joke
 - “No” argument
 - Before you say no to pushing limits, make sure it's not a knee jerk reaction
 - If you always say no, they'll find a way to do it anyway/won't ask you anymore
 - “I get it...” and give reason in one sentence (not safe, etc.). Express understanding and respect for their request, feelings of disappointment, etc.
 - Shrug can effectively end the conversation – don't re-engage.
 - “Pushing buttons”

- When you've lost it and you're both overly emotional, consider saying, "We're both out of control right now, let's take a break" and back away. If child follows you into your room, consider "I'm going to take a shower" and start undressing
- You're teaching them de-escalation, conflict resolution skills
- When you go back to it, let them speak first - "Tell me what you want me to hear."
- "Crossing the line" argument
 - For verbal escalation, swearing, outright disrespect, calmly say "I'm really surprised that you would say that" and walk away, **completely disengage**. You do not need to lecture them; they know they were disrespectful.
 - Next time they come to you for something, say "I would love to but yesterday you said 'xyz,' so it's not going to happen today." Relationships are reciprocal, so it shows actions have consequences. Give you the control and power.

** The teen brain is not good at thinking things through, and that leads to **impulsive, risky behavior** – experimentation, acting on emotions in the moment. With all their distractions, they are not good at sequential thinking – "if this happens...then..." So reinforce thinking ahead of time, strategizing situations, responsibilities – "When do you plan to do your homework?" "What's your safety plan for tonight?" Observe where issues seem to arise, patterns. Walk through situations and possible game plans and discuss expectations/consequences. Help them problem solve – ask what are the obstacles and what can you do differently?

** For behavior that is not safe/acceptable, **start conversations with understanding** – "I get how this might have happened" but still impose consequences. May want to have a "no questions asked at the moment" policy for calls when in trouble, maybe a code word to still save face. Give kids an option to be honest.

** **Conformity/peer pressure are powerful motivators**, regarding sex, substance use, social networking, etc. Teens are hyper self-conscious and self-involved, like there is an "imaginary audience," and they feel pressured into adopting roles (the funny one, the stylish one, etc.) – they are posers, especially on social media. Ask them what that's like for them, what's motivating them.

** Ask if there is anything you could be doing differently as a parent and **how you can be more supportive**, and be open to criticism.

** **Keep your house safe** for your kids – careful with meds, alcohol, marijuana. Talk about expectations when parents aren't home, don't leave kids alone at home for weekend. Talk about what to do if a friend is in trouble with substances.

** Recommends **parental controls** on phones (www.childsafemedia.com offers good info), **time limits** (help them set own limits), restrictions on which apps they can download without parental permission. Watch out for downloaded VPNs and chronic use in bedrooms, which becomes isolating. If feel need to connect with teen at school, get flip phone or smart watch.

** **Find activities to do together**. Even if it's out of your comfort zone, be receptive to places of connection, doing things together they like to do. Be creative and find ways to get them into settings of relaxation so you both can be more open. There is still a little child inside teens that likes to be with their parents.

** **Time management issues are about problem-solving**. Observe how it's a problem (phones, sleep, relationships, etc.) and understand how your teen works best – maybe needs down time before digging into work, may work better in morning or night, etc. to help them craft their own solution. When time management becomes your problem, stop rescuing them and let them deal with the consequences.

****Acknowledge that the world is scary for all of us** but give them the competence and confidence that they can handle it by letting them practice making decisions. That's how you build resilience.

To contact Joani Geltman and for more information, go to

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[Slide presentation](#)

[YouTube channel](#)

joanigeltman.blogspot.com

[Link to 2023 video presentation](#) - for best sound quality, we recommend listening with headphones