

PARENT UPDATE ON A SURVIVAL GUIDE TO PARENTING TEENS

On April 3, child development expert Joani Geltman returned to Brookline for the PTO/B-PEN presentation “**A Survival Guide to Parenting Teens: Talking to Your Kids About Sexting, Drinking, Drugs, and Other Things that FREAK YOU OUT.**” Using humor and more than 30 years of experience, Geltman shared stories and advice designed to help defuse parent anxiety and offer concrete strategies.

Key takeaways for parents included:

- Changes in the brain during adolescence are the most since infancy, so **adolescents are on overload** with new feelings, thoughts, worries. The feeling center (amygdala) is super active and hypersensitive, often overriding rational thinking.
- Adolescents tend to be very narcissistic with little empathy for others and prone to **misreading communication**. They often perceive anger and judgment in tone and facial expression that you are not feeling. Develop awareness of tone of your voice so it is inviting, not critical – “Not what you say, how you say it.”
- Attitude is not always rebellion. **Home is often a safe space** for “teen drama” and parents need to be careful not to match adolescents’ heightened emotions – when you get attitude, consider checking in later to let feelings calm down a little.
- Also, ask yourself, “**What might be triggering attitude** – acne, bullying, friendship problems, etc.” Kids say that what stresses them out includes: academics, sports, injuries, lack of study/organizational skills, teacher relationships, college prep, body image, changes in family/friend relationships, financial difficulties, jobs, social media, unrealistic expectations.
- **Check your own expectations** – adolescents are changing who they are, who they want to be -- i.e., they may not be interested in things that were once compelling. Figure out how to meet them where they are. Give them permission to become who they want to be.
- Consider -- changes academically can often be **self-esteem issues** that they are “not smart enough.” If they don’t try as hard (i.e., don’t turn assignments in on time) that provides an easy excuse.
- **Invite conversation** – don’t judge. Open the door to talk with an observation, i.e., “It must be hard that I’m spending so much time taking care of Gramma” or “It must be disappointing not to be able to play soccer.” Then ask, “How can I help?”
- Adolescents are **hyper self-conscious** -- body image issues can be very painful for boys as well as girls.

- Be aware -- **self-medicating** is easier and more common now.
- Teens love to fight – it’s part of going through the **process of separation** to find out who they are. Argumentativeness is a healthy way of saying, “I’m not you.” Four common styles:
 - **Gotcha** – they try to “one-up” you, get power by upsetting you through niggling, judging you with sarcasm, snark, etc. Don’t get mad or sad, use humor – “It’s so cute when you’re being a brat” or “I think I can live with you not liking my haircut.”
 - **No** – while adolescents think they are more entitled as they get older, we still have to say no to things unsafe or unreasonable. Stay in control, stick to your guns – be clear, acknowledge their feelings, but give no more than one line of explanation. Then, “I’m really sorry, but...” shrug shoulders, walk away. Don’t re-engage.
 - **Pushing Buttons** – when you don’t have the emotional resources to let it go and you get engaged in an argument, that gives them hope you will change your mind. You need to cut and run – “We are both out of control right now, we need to take a break.” (Geltman suggests one way to clear the room is tell them you’re going to take a shower and start taking your clothes off – no teen wants to see their parents naked!) Restart the conversation when you’re both in a calmer place with – “OK, tell me what you wanted me to hear.” Be empathetic – “I know how much you want this, and I’m sorry I have to say no.”
 - **Crossing the Line** – they explode and say something too disrespectful to wave off. You calmly say, “Wow, I can’t believe you just said that to me,” and leave – that takes the heat out. When they come to you later needing something, calmly say that even though you love doing stuff for them, you’re “not feeling like it after you said to me.” Repeat what they said -- they often don’t understand the power of words.
- **Responsibility** is an important quality, but chores are the least important thing in adolescents’ lives. Remind them twice, if they don’t and a chore is time sensitive, do it yourself. But the next time they come to you with a need, you can “choose” not to do something for them, just like they chose not to do a chore, etc.
- Help them understand that **relationships are reciprocal**. Don’t let them demand – you are not their servant. Whenever they make a demand, ask “Is there a question in there?”
- The adolescent brain is not good at sequential thinking, is prone to distraction. Consequences are often not present in the moment of a teen’s decision-making, with unsafe temptations more widely accessible today. **Teach them strategies for thinking things through.** Talk about risky behavior and admit that this is part of their culture. Every time they leave the house for unstructured time, ask “What are you going to do to stay safe?” Discuss what can they do to get around peer pressure and save face (i.e., “I can’t vape, I have asthma”). It takes training and repetition to help them avoid unsafe behavior.
- Initiate conversation by **asking them to be the expert** – “Tell me about this juuling stuff...”
- If you suspect they are using substances, you have to invade their privacy. They need to know that you know, that they can’t get away with stuff, they are not invincible. Tell them you know you can’t make them NOT do something, but you can change the frame of the

conversation by **helping them understand the risks**. Ask them how their behavior might affect their goals.

- If you catch them with substances, put **controls on money**. Ask for receipts – kids are *VERY* clever. Don't give them their own Lyft or Uber accounts – that's a way to come up with extra cash – one kid charges to the account, then the other riders reimburse the kid who pays with cash. Kids also can buy prepaid credit cards with cash, then use the cards to order juuls/vapes online, with delivery to an Amazon locker so parents won't know.
- Consider **parental controls** on kids' phones to limit opportunity – Verizon family, netsanity, netnanny, Teen safe, ProtectYoungeyes.com, etc. If they have unlimited time, they will use it. With restrictions, they will learn time management.
- Encourage family **hanging out in common spaces**. Don't enable them to stay in their room all the time with unlimited access to phone and computer (YouTube, Netflix, Hulu, etc.). Watch out for VPN app on phones, which enables bypassing phone limits. (You can go to their App store and check for VPN download).
- **Teen proof your home** –
 - Lock up liquor, pot, Rx drugs. Be responsible in your own use.
 - If the house is going to be empty for any length of time, let police know, reprogram the alarm, make sure kids don't have access.
 - Sneaking out – if you have sleepovers, let them know that you get up frequently for insomnia, whatever, etc. and set alarm to check periodically.
 - Be aware that kids often sneak alcohol in backpacks, water bottles, etc.

Above all, **find the fun** – jump into their life. Get to know who they are and what they like.

More information can be found through Geltman's books and her parenting blog - <http://joanigeltman.blogspot.com/>

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