



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

Parents and Teenagers

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W. Burney Overton

My concern is very deep for the problems teenagers face in today's world, and for their parents who want very much to be the kinds of parents that enable their children to come through these perilous times as healthy and whole persons.

Several things have come together just at this time to impel me to write.

My love for my own children and grandchildren is a part of it. We have four children. They are married and now have, among them, thirteen children. Two are already teenagers. The time will rapidly come when all the parents will be parents of teenagers.

The counseling that I do with families, and parents, and teenagers is a part of it and a constant reminder of just how troubled these times are for both parents and teenagers, and of the traumas that too frequently occur. I am confronted with the problems of normal growing up, intensified by the troubled state of our world, and by all the confusions and difficulty that accompany the wide-spread use of drugs and alcohol, and the apparent increase in sexual activity among teenagers. It appears that we are in an era of "freedom," permissiveness, and a pursuit of "pleasure," characterized, all too often, by defiance, rebellion, disregard for authority, willfulness, and a head-long disregard for possible consequences.

The gulf between parent and teenager is very great. It is hard to realize just how different values and points of view are. It appears that the generation gap is very real – that often parents and teenagers seem not to be in the same world. Parents tend to depend upon their own wisdom and experience. They see it as important that their children heed their decisions, which are made in the best interest of the child (of whatever age) so that the child is ultimately adequately equipped to live successfully in an adult world. So parents try to retain the power and the authority and the control. But every effort to do so seems destined for failure. Conflicts occur. Harsh words are spoken. Demands are made. Limits are imposed. Punishments are decreed. And every encounter is marked by rebellion, defensiveness, and frustration. No one is satisfied. Nothing seems to get settled. Upheaval seems to be the order of the day. Parents are worried – and concerned – and fearful – and suspicious – and they try all the harder to make their system of parenting work. Only it doesn't seem to work.

I hear this every day. I read of it in newspapers and magazines. I see indications of it on television. These are troubled times for both parents and teenagers.

Three things that I read recently are a part of what impelled me to write this article.

December 14-19, 1980, *The Atlanta Constitution* ran a series of articles on the drug problem among teenagers. It was written by Robert Coram and Charlene Smith-Williams. It was graphic. It was well written. The documentation was sound.

It was also frightening.

It appears that drugs are more available to our young people, and more prevalent than seems possible. Apparently, it is next to impossible for a young person not to be exposed to drugs, or to avoid the temptation to try them out. Even if a teenager chooses not to use drugs, he/she sees, and may even experience, some of the effect just because drugs are in such common use.

It is almost unbelievable what drugs do to the human body – and, apparently, especially to teenagers. Many try to play the effects down. Many parents would like to shut their eyes to the problem and to the possibility of it being a real problem right in the family.

The January 1981 issue of *McCalls Magazine* featured an article, “How to Live / Almost / Happily with Teenagers” by Drs. Joel and Lois Davitz.

It is a well-written article. The focus is on the relationships between parents and teenagers rather than on the drug issue. Excellent suggestions are given to parents to enable them to make the teen years more satisfactory for all concerned.

Then, in the Dear Abby column of *The Atlanta Constitution* on February 9, 1981 was a letter from a distraught mother of a 17-year-old girl who “does as she pleases, paying no attention to my rules.”

A final stimulus to my getting to my writing came from my encounter with a close friend who came to me deeply distressed because of what seemed to be happening to her own teenage children, and between them and her. She is intelligent and well educated. She is very conscientious about the parenting task – tries to keep herself informed – really cares for her children – intends to do a good job as a parent, and does – and yet, she and her husband and the children are caught up in the present-day problems of teenagers and of families with teenagers.

All the factors combined to urge me to write.

Sometimes it is hard to realize the scope of the problem.

From the Dear Abby letter, “Before she started High School she was a good girl and got good grades. But she is a senior now, and her grades are slipping, and I can’t trust her because she lies about where she goes and what she does.” More details included “having sex with every boy she goes out with,” and “an abortion last year, but she never admitted it,” also “does as she pleases – pays no attention to rules.” “Her

father...is hot-headed – no help – doesn't talk calmly – puts her down, calls her a tramp, and lets her know he doesn't trust her."

The concluding article of *The Atlanta Constitution* series on drugs says about marijuana (the most common and most widely used of the drugs), "The symptoms (of use) include a marked drop in grades, uncharacteristic truancy, a change in eating or dressing habits, a growing hostility toward the family, resistance to authority, friends who visit but do not talk with parents, changes in hours of sleeping, frequent use of Visine to treat red eyes, and illogical thought patterns.....It is difficult for parents to determine if the signs are a part of the growing up process or if they indicate drug usage."

"It is at this point that parents often are overcome by indecision. They do not know what to do or where to go. They find that accepted avenues of help offer little relief."

Dear Abby's reply said, in part, "If you really love your daughter, you will put her in the hands of a counselor with whom she can communicate comfortably.....Don't be judgmental. Let her know that you love her, and let the counselor do the rest."

The Atlanta Constitution series suggested parents' groups for help, as well as getting treatment. It also underscored the importance of "clearly defined rules for children.....enforced without exception.....Parents have to learn that it is O.K. to say 'No' to their children."

All this is, in my opinion, excellent advice. It doesn't go quite far enough. I believe that there is more that parents can do – and that they need to do. Parents hold the key. They have the most influence. They can learn and practice ways of parenting that are most effective for teenagers.

It appears to be true that teenagers are quite subject to peer pressure. The teen years are, to say the least, momentous years. It is hard to realize the extent of change that takes place between the ages of twelve and twenty. Even a single year involves marked change. A thirteen year old and a fourteen year old tend not to see each other as peers. In a year's time, a girl may change from the little "tomboy" to the lovely young lady, or a boy may grow six to eight inches. The maturing process is very rapid so that the teenager is one day a child and the next a young adult – or almost. Values change. Outlook changes. Capacity to understand changes. In a few months a teenager may change from a responsive and obedient child to a seemingly irresponsible and rebellious young person who goes against his/her parents and disdains all authority. A thirteen year old is markedly different from a nineteen year old. Indeed, there are marked differences between sixteen year olds and eighteen year olds. Rapid change seems to be the order of the day. Small wonder that it is so difficult to predict what might happen next.

In that age period, the person is seeking himself/herself in a very real sense. He/she is seeking freedom and independence, as well as trying to preserve the security of

being dependent. He/she wants freedom and fences – independence and dependence – to make decisions and to be told what the decisions are.

There are deep needs having to do with relationships. All persons need and want to be taken into account – to be treated as a person in his/her own right – to be assured and re-assured that he/she is truly loved no matter what happens. The teen years are years of discovering self – of declaring separateness – of going after what is wanted. Pushing against the fences, testing authority, and trying out one’s own decisions are all a part of the scary, changing time of life. Teenagers are “into themselves” more than at any other time of life.

Small wonder that they are unpredictable, changing, moody, defiant, defensive, and rebellious. Or that they feel not understood nor accepted. They have trouble understanding themselves and accepting themselves.

Parents experience an equally troubled time – especially conscientious parents who are determined to be successful as parents. I observe that, while conscientious parents are determined to be successful, they frequently are very unclear as to what constitutes success. They have their values. They have their ideals. They also have their “hang-ups” and their needs. They tend to believe that their own values and ideals are the ones their children are to have if they are successful parents. Often I find that parents have as their goal as successful parents that their children be happy – without any clear notion as to what constitutes happiness, nor how it is to be achieved.

Through the growing-up years, the parents have been the deciders – the permitters – the forbidders. Children have learned to ask – and perhaps to manipulate – to get what they want. However the pattern had developed, the parent says, “Yes,” or “No” – sees it that the decision is for the child’s own good – and expects conformity so that the child will learn the right values and grow up to be a responsible, well adjusted adult.

Typically, therefore, the style of parenting is authoritarian. I remember a fine responsible parent who said to me, “Until my child is ready to make decisions for himself, I’ll make them for him” – but nowhere in the system was there provision for teaching the child, even when he was a teenager, how to make decisions for himself and be responsible for them. An authority style does not tend to teach responsible decision making to the one under authority, and yet society expects people, when they become adults, to be able to make responsible decisions and live by them.

While drugs, alcohol, sex, and rebellion are, indeed, very real problems with which parents must deal, I believe that effective dealing with them is rooted in the kind and quality of relationship that exists between parents and teenagers.

If parents function so that teenagers are secure and comfortable in the relationship (this can also be true while they are still children), values can be taught, decisions can be made – jointly --, problems can be talked out, guidance can be provided, and the teenager will tend to respond with constructive decisions of his/her own, and with responsible

functioning. In fact, if the relationship is really good, the teenager can cope with and work through the processes of “breaking free” with a minimum of trauma for all concerned. And parents can see the “nest emptying” without so much fear and anxiety and “lostness.”

But the parents hold the key.

My suggestion is for parents to re-evaluate their parenting style and their understanding of their reasons for functioning as they do. Even among parents who talk a good deal with their children, there is a strong tendency to remain authoritarian – to listen to and talk with the teenager, and then to make the decisions and give them to the teenager. If they are different from what he/she wants or considers fair, the trouble has started.

I wonder what the messages are that the teenagers get from their parents.

Judging from reactions, they aren't very positive.

I believe that teenagers need, and respond well to, authority and to the decisions of authority as long as they feel heard, taken into account, loved, accepted and understood. But wise authority does not make the decisions unilaterally, but rather consults with the teenager – makes him/her a party to the decisions and to the responsibilities involved.

It seems important to me for parents to raise questions with themselves about their own motives and reasons for the rules and decisions that are made. Over and over, I raise this question, only to find that parents are very unclear as to real reasons behind the rules.

This is a typical experience. A teenager disobeys and is found out. The parent sees that the next step is to decide on a suitable punishment. “You have done thus and so – broken the rule. Now you must be punished. You are grounded for a week.”

What is the purpose of the punishment? “To teach the teenager not to do it again.” Does it work? “Usually not.” Then why the punishment? Is there not some other way to teach your teenager?

And besides, as long as the parent holds the authority – makes the decisions – attempts to enforce – determines the punishment – seeks to make it stick – the responsibility rests with the parent. I question that the teenager ever learns anything except how to get what he wants without getting caught and how to avoid punishment.

Whoever is the authority holds the responsibility.

How can parents teach children to be their own authority and be responsible for their own decisions and the outcome of them? Children need to learn this, for, as adults, they are expected to make their own decisions and be responsible for them and the outcome.

I think that parents need to make decisions and be responsible for their children. They need to function from an authority position upon occasion. I also think they need to learn how to be effective counselors or consultants to their children, especially in the teen years, and so, guide them, while they learn to function with their own authority and responsibility.

Parent as counselor and consultant takes understanding, time, concentration, and maybe hard work. It seems much easier just to give an order – give or withhold permission – declare the punishment for disobedience – hold the authority. To be a counselor or consultant means to be a resource person, not a decision maker. It means to be willing to be – and actually to be present to and available to the teenager. It means to do a lot of listening in a very non-judgmental way. It means to share self – tell of values and why they are values – express fears and concerns and why – disclose ideals and hopes and goals. It means to be “shock-proof” in response to whatever the teenager chooses to tell or talk about. It means to be accepting and understanding – and to show the interest and take the time to find out what the teenager really means. It means to offer suggestions (advice, if you prefer) in the form of, “What I believe I would do.....” rather than, “You ought to” – “You must....” – “Why don’t you.....” – or even “Now the thing for you to do is” It means to tell them your point of view, and to seek theirs. It means, when counseling or consulting, not to try to deal with who is right and who is wrong, but rather to deal with different views and understandings and values. It means to take one’s self into account, and also the other person. It means not to impose authority.

I underscore – it means to be a resource person and not a decision maker.

The quality of relationship where parent is authority, counselor, consultant, caretaker, friend, supporter, ideally is built early – long before the child becomes a teenager. If it has not been built, it is never too late to start, even if the teenager is 17 or 18.

How is it done?

First, become informed parents – about what is going on in the teen world – about drugs –and alcohol – and sex – and sexuality – and emotions – and needs – and desires – and fears – and uncertainties –and pressures – and all that is, or may be going on.

Second, learn how to talk with (not to) and really listen to the child – his point of view – the reasons for it – the feelings involved – the searching – and uncertainty –and insecurity – and the covering up – and fear – and hiding – and defensiveness. The teen years are an identity crisis time. When people are having difficulty with identity – desires – being accepted – being included – having approval – conflicting pressures— they really need someone in their lives who does not judge – not advise –nor decide for them – but does take them into account and help them work through all the troubling aspects of their lives.

Third, be an example. Model the value systems. Be clear and explicit about what they are and why – and do not impose them. Help the child talk about value systems – and wise and unwise decisions and actions – and why and why not. Teach them about drugs, and alcohol, and sex, and sexuality, and being persons, and being in relationships, responsibility – and encourage them to make their own decisions about these things.

Fourth, when the parent actually makes the decision – and this is necessary at times for the safety and security of the child – do so very plainly and unequivocally and firmly and consistently. Take on full responsibility for the decision. Explain its reasons. Make sure it is enforceable (I forbid you to smoke, or use drugs, or drink, or have sex, is an unforceable rule or limit). Be very clear as to the result if not obeyed – and follow through consistently.

I think one of the greatest problems of parenting is inconsistency. “If you don’t eat your dinner, you can’t have dessert,” said to a four year old. He doesn’t eat his dinner, and he does have dessert. “I told you to pick up your room. Do it before you go out,” said to a teenager. He doesn’t pick up the room, and he does go out – and maybe he gets fussed at or experiences the displeasure of his parent, but not much happens. “You are to be in by midnight” – and he comes in at 12:30 AM with some excuse for being late – and nothing happens.

If rules are going to be made by parents – and children need to know that parents love them enough to set limits – they need to be realistic, with reasons why – unequivocal, with consequences clearly stated – enforced consistently – whatever the age of the child.

I believe, however, that the teen years are best handled by the parents guiding the children into their own decision making, not by the parents making the decisions and trying to enforce them.

If, early in his/her life, a child is provided with clear information about the use and effect of drugs; if similar information and values are provided about alcohol, sex and sex activity; about relationships and decision making and responsibility; and if, through it all, the child hears the message of love, of being taken into account, of being heard and understood, of the importance of his/her making of wise decisions, of the need to be responsible and the freedom to be, there is a very strong likelihood that the child – and the parent – will be well equipped to handle the teen years in a satisfying and constructive way.

Teenagers are going to try their wings. They are going to experiment. They are going to do the things that other teenagers are doing. They are going to test their freedom. They may make mistakes. They may get into trouble. There can be serious and undesirable consequences.

If they know they are loved, if they know they can count on acceptance from their parents, if they know that they bear the consequences of their decisions, they are likely to turn out O.K. – and so will their parents.