

Parents As Positive Environmental Filters For Youth

by

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With the plethora of media bombardment that impinges on today's youth, parents need to take a more active role in the lives of their offspring. It is not enough to merely try to ban or deny access to certain video games, computer services, music, or television programs; nor is it usually prudent to do so. Psychologists working with adolescents' parents or supervisory caregiver adults are often called upon to assist them by helping them set appropriate boundaries and act as positive environmental filters for their offspring. This is largely due to the simple fact that most individuals supervising children and adolescents don't know how to do this appropriately, given both the dearth of appropriate parenting given them and the nature of our rapidly changing media-oriented and easily-accessible environment which often includes music, television, video games, and computer multimedia (including many available on-line services).

Most parents I've encountered in my practice, unfortunately, attempt to solve this complex problem by merely giving the message to their offspring that they may not watch, participate in, or listen to certain "forbidden" television programs, video games, computer services, or music styles. By doing so, parents are actually accomplishing the following: (a) encouraging their offspring to do the very thing they have been forbidden to do, since teens often like to taste "forbidden fruit", (b) helping to engender power struggles and conflicts over boundary issues between themselves and their kids, (c) placing themselves in the negative light of being "the bad guys" who simply either misunderstand, don't care about, or don't value their offspring and their feelings or opinions, and/or (d) placing added barriers between their kids and themselves, usually resulting in children and adolescents not wishing to be close to, trust, or communicate with their parents. It is often, therefore, incumbent upon the treating child, adolescent, and/or family therapist to creatively assist parents with their roles as positive filters for their youth without the parents transgressing major boundaries or encouraging Adlerian "mistaken goals" which only further individual

and familial pathology.

In my sessions with adult caregivers of youth, I often spend several sessions (both alone with the caregivers and together with their youthful charges) teaching them appropriate techniques and concepts (e.g., natural and logical consequences, boundaries, communication skills, conflict management approaches, active listening) in order to accomplish this often seemingly elusive goal. Parents who genuinely wish to open better lines of communication with their children and adolescents in order to help monitor, protect, or filter what they listen to, watch, or participate in may do so more efficaciously by following a few social and psychological heuristics. While these guidelines are not intended to be a panacea for all ills or to apply to each and every scenario, I find that they often start a trend in the home of open, honest, and respectful communication and conflict resolution that benefits everyone. Some of these elementary guidelines that I instruct parents and caregivers in, then, are as follows:

1. Rather than forbidding their children or teens to listen to certain music forms or artists, play with some video games, interact with certain on-line computer services, or watch violence or sex on television, I strongly encourage parents to actively participate in as many of these activities as possible with their offspring. Afterwards, they need to talk with (NOT to or at) their child or teenager in a nonjudgmental, respectful, and responsible manner in order to try to understand why the teen likes the television show/video game/music/on-line chat area, what purpose it serves, and how close to "reality" the teen thinks it actually is. This will give adults invaluable insight into their offspring's thoughts as a "reality check" on how he/she is processing incoming information from the world around us all. In addition, it could alert them to the early warning signs of a need for greater intervention on their (or possibly a professional's) part...or it could reassure them that their son or daughter is "on the mark".

2. Parents can act as an active "filter" for their child or adolescent by discussing various sociointerpersonal issues that are brought up in certain music forms, television shows, computer-based chat lines, or video games. Teaching their youth that these media sources may be a source of amusement, but that they do not always correlate with "reality" and

should not be taken as "truth" that the teen or child needs to then act upon or believe in shows both respect and confidence in the youth. These feelings will, in turn, often be accurately perceived by youth as genuine parental attempts at meeting them "half way", with accompanying positive results. Closely tied to this aspect is a parent being proactive in these arenas; this is especially true with younger children and pre-teens. This form of intervention might include parents making certain television shows or computer access services inaccessible by means of one of many of the "lock out" services or devices commercially available to consumers for just that purpose. I do not, however, encourage this strategy with teens, since they can easily get what they want in this arena from other sources...furthering an increased distance from their parents who attempt to enforce such strategies at home.

3. When famous role models perform socially and personally inappropriate or self-defeating/self-destructive acts, parents need to make certain that their son or daughter understands that what the famous individual is being paid for is his/her athletic, musical, or acting abilities...NOT for his/her negative, self-defeating/self-destructive, or antisocial behaviors. Again, this needs to be done in a respectful and open manner that encourages participation in the discussion. It should never be used as a forum for parents or teens to "filibuster" or "soap box" on their personal vendettas. I often have to remind parents that nobody likes to be lectured to in pejorative or negative manners.

4. Whenever discussing any issue with their offspring, parents frequently have to be trained how to do it in a manner that is nonthreatening, nonjudgmental, respectful, and information seeking. I will often use the analogy of parents acting as if they are scientists attempting to understand the reasons for a particular situation that they do not understand. In doing so, they allow their offspring to teach them about their "mindsets" in an atmosphere of mutual sharing and understanding. It is often prudent to remind parents (sometimes repeatedly) that they cannot positively influence their child or adolescent if he/she thinks they do not care or that they discount his/her opinions.

5. Perhaps the most difficult skill psychologists have to teach their parental patients (and sometimes, themselves) is to be a good role model for their child or teenager. The years

of "Do as I say, not as I do" are gone forever. Actually, research clearly indicates that this message never did work, although many parents act as if they are not aware of this finding...and perhaps they are not aware. Parents should be taught (by both didactic and active role modeling on the therapist's part) that they can't command respect (any more than I can when I work with them); but they can earn it by being a persistent and consistent positive role model for the actions and beliefs that they wish their son or daughter to emulate. Psychologists need to be mindful of this caveat as well, since they can do much to encourage appropriate behaviors in both their youth and adult patients by vicarious methods.

6. Since parents are often prone to focus on each and every aspect they dislike about their teen's behavior (many of which are either minor faux pas at best or outright major boundary transgressions and "none of parents' business" at worst), I find myself repeatedly reminding them of the Adlerian concept of making parental demands few in number, reasonable in nature, important in scope, and responsible in manner. This can be done by first asking parents what the most important and immediate issues at hand are, getting them to hierarchically ranking these concerns in descending order of importance, and picking only the top two or three to target in the short run.

7. Finally, I encourage all persons (and I DO mean ALL) to remember that each and every one of us is completely responsible for our own personal behaviors, feelings, and thoughts. No one can "make" anyone else do any action or feel a particular way by merely hearing it on the radio, reading about it in a book or on an on-line computer service, playing it with a board game or video game, or seeing it on television. If parents do their job correctly (particularly if they do so from the start), they can help "media-proof" their offspring against the negative messages that are often present in the environment around us all by teaching them at an early age how to make responsible choices. They can't do this by forbidding or censoring the things their teen listens to or sees absolutely or categorically; nor can they do this by leaving this most important of jobs (i.e., parenting) to society, the schools, the media, their therapist, religious figures, legal authorities, baby sitters, nannies, or their offspring's friends.