



PEACEFUL PARENTING

BY KATHLEEN MATCHUNIS

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Are You Doing Everything that You Can to Help Your Child?

Many parents wonder if they are doing everything they can to help their child? Many things come to mind such as enrolling their child in the right school, extracurricular activities, and providing their child with a comfortable life. Of course, all of these things are important, but are there other things to consider?

After my many years as an educator, I saw many children who were enrolled in good schools, participated in extracurricular activities, and had a comfortable life. However, these children did not have good social skills. They felt more comfortable texting than conversing. When they had to have a conversation, they kept it brief and to the point, much like a text message. They seemed to have lost the art of starting and maintaining a conversation. The point of their conversations was to obtain something that they wanted or needed, rather than express interest or concern about another person.

With all the technology available now, it is no wonder that kids do not feel comfortable conversing. In the book, "Alone Together, Do We Expect More of Technology than We Do of Ourselves?", this issue is examined on a deeper level. If kids are allowed to use technology without limits, they become uncomfortable with interpersonal relationships. They can become completely self-absorbed, wanting a response immediately to their requests for information. They can grow uncomfortable with the idea that a conversation is not always predictable and that they may have to spontaneously respond, rather than responding at their leisure, as they do with texting. The plethora of choices and the speed of the internet and social media lead young people to expect instant gratification. Instant gratification is not conducive to good relationships or success in the workplace. They can become completely desensitized by being able to make comments on Facebook without seeing the reaction of others to their comments. They can feel threatened and ostracized by others if the comments are directed towards them.

While technology definitely has its place in the world and in the workplace, kids need more than ever to have family time and an opportunity to converse with others without TV, I-pod, I-pad, and I-phone on. Many young people don't know what it is like to really listen to someone and to be heard. Some parents are guilty of not being able to separate themselves from their technology, as well. What a gift it is to have someone's undivided attention. Because the use of technology is so prevalent, we, as parents, have a choice to make: Are we going to place limits on technology use in our families to preserve our relationships or are we going to just accept this invasion into our family lives?

The solution doesn't have to be complicated. We are all leading busy lives, but children's social skills would be greatly improved if parents just ate dinner with their children without electronic gadgets or TV on. It doesn't have to be a homemade dinner or every single night. If that arrangement is not possible, just designate another time of the day or evening to talk and give each other undivided attention.

Developing a Relationship of Trust with Your Teen

Developing a relationship of trust with your teen should begin well in advance of the teen years. There are several things to keep in mind as your child is growing up.

- Always show respect for your child as a person. This doesn't mean that you always agree with your child. It means that you show respect for their opinions, preferences, and their essence. By disagreeing respectfully with your child, you help them build confidence in themselves.
- Be a good listener. Even if your teen shares superficial events, show interest and ask questions. Make sure that you ask information questions, rather than yes/no questions to stimulate conversation.
- Let your child know that you have their best interest at heart. Your teens need to know that you love them and have got "their back". On the other hand, don't defend your teens when you know that they are in the wrong or have made a mistake. They need to face consequences (even legal) when they make bad choices.
- Be authoritative without being authoritarian! Let your teens know that you are the responsible adult in charge, but not the dictator in the family. Your teen will respect you more if you tell them that you are making a particular decision because of safety/security concerns or because a certain situation is not in their best interest
- Don't be your child's friend, be their parent. Your teen already has friends, they need a parent. You should have your own friends. If you don't have your own friends, you may be living through your teens. If you don't know how to do this, you may want to consider getting coaching in this area.

Be consistent with your rules and decisions. Teens will respond better if you are consistent and they know what to expect.

Is Your Soon-to-be Graduate Ready for the Workplace?

By Kathleen A. Matchunis, President of Connecting, Inc.

Your soon -to -be graduate may be academically prepared to handle many jobs, but does he/she have the social skills appropriate for the work place? Many of our youth are ill-prepared for the workplace socially because they have relied on technology for most of their communication.

Many college-aged students may know their basic etiquette, but when it comes to making conversation or dealing with a confrontation at work, they may be ill-equipped. Why? Let's see- when you text or use social media as your major means of communication, you have time to compose your response and respond to others on your own terms and on your own timeline. How does this translate to the workplace when an employee is at a meeting or in a discussion with one's colleague or one's boss? Not so well. Responses need to be spontaneous and appropriate in the business world. Our kids have not had practice with this type of interaction. If someone questions them or puts them on the spot, they tend to go into melt-down mode.

How can students prepare themselves for the workplace? They need to put down their cell phones, laptops, i-pads, and tablets and practice having conversations. Start by interacting more with the family and people with whom they feel safe, and then branch out with acquaintances.

As a parent, challenge your child to converse with you to prepare him/her for the workplace. The only reason that anyone can become proficient in this area is by practice. It will not happen overnight and it might be awkward at first, but it will be an investment in your child's future.

Teens should be prepared in an interview to state their strengths and their weaknesses. They should be able to "spin" their weaknesses to sound like strengths. As strengths, teens should remember to mention basic things like honesty, dependability, and punctuality. Many people lose their jobs because of a lack of these qualities. I recommend that teens say "I am a perfectionist" or "I am too hard on myself".

If you need your child needs more practice in dealing with business situations, consider role- playing different job related situations with your teen or pursue social skills coaching.

Letting Go, While Maintaining a Relationship with Your College-aged Child

You feel that you have been through everything with your children. They have been a priority and a major part of your life. Then they go to college. Expectations for your relationship have to be clarified. When my twins left for college (double wah-wah), my husband and I agreed with them that it would be reasonable to stay in touch with them at least once a week, most likely on the weekend, when all of our schedules are not so hectic. Of course, the twins knew that they could call more often.

We have maintained our once a week contact for the most part. The twins call during the week if they have a concern or are sick. It works for us, but it has been an adjustment after seeing them every day. How do we make the most of these phone calls? We make notes on anything financial or school-related, so we don't forget to address these issues. We try to ask about what they are doing for fun without getting too intrusive. It's good to know that your child has a good work/play, balance, while away at school.

We frame most advice as "Do you think that it might be a good idea to explore _____? College aged students need to make their own decisions and live with the resulting consequences in order to learn life lessons, as painful as this might be for parents. This type of learning results in lasting results and helps create confidence.

By clarifying expectations and framing any parental advice as a suggestion to explore, you can transition from a child-adult to an adult-adult relationship with your child. Continuing to tell your children what to do will create self-doubt in their minds about their ability to make decisions.

Remember to plan visitation time, so that it will be fun for everyone and not conflict with study, exam, and work schedules. Try to choose activities where you can interact and "catch up" with each other in a relaxed way.

If you feel that you are struggling while your child is away at school, seek help! It is challenging to be very involved in your child's life and then have them suddenly not there. This may be a great time to catch up on some of those hobbies and interests which you haven't been able to pursue for a while. It's great to stay in touch with other parents whose children have gone to college. You are probably going through similar emotional issues and can support each other during the "tough" times.

How did you learn most of what you know? Be honest! You know that you learned what you know through the good and not so good decisions that you have made in your life! Let your child grow and do the same!

Reconnect with Your Teen!

Has this ever happened to you? You are trying to talk to your teen, while he or she is playing a video game or on the computer, and you are feeling disconnected from this person who used to cuddle with you and wanted to be with you all the time.

You are not alone. It is normal for teens to separate from their parents in order to become more independent. However, we don't have to lose all closeness with our teens during their adolescence.

As a parent, it is important to set boundaries that will protect your teen and preserve your relationship. It is important to be authoritative without being authoritarian. In other words, you are in charge, but you don't have to be a dictator. It is essential to have expectations such as conversing during dinner, sharing the small victories and challenges of life. You can be a great role-model and set the tone of the conversation about telling funny stories about your childhood or people in your family. Kids usually love to hear about their heritage and family traditions.

Start by setting a good example with your own social skills. When your teen talks to you, make sure that you give him/her your full attention, without looking at your electronic devices. Let your teen know that he/she is your priority.

Sit down with your teen and collaborate on some rules for electronics. Let your teen know that your motivation for making these rules is your desire to have positive, open communication with him/her. For example, a good rule is not to have electronics at the dinner table. Another rule could regard the amount of time spent on the computer, etc. Don't let electronics sabotage your relationship with your teen!

Teens & Technology – How much is too much?

Is your teen disconnected from you and the rest of the family because they are usually connected to an electronic device? Do you have to compete with the I-phone, I-pad, I-pod, etc.?

How much is too much? We really don't want to cut our kids off from all technology, but we do need to set boundaries regarding technology, so that its usage does not invade our interpersonal relationships. It is very important to keep the computer or laptops usage confined to a central family area of the house. Especially with younger children and young teens, it is important to monitor their use.

Technology has no place at the table unless someone is expecting an emergency phone call. It is important to have a dedicated time, free of distraction to communicate with your family. Dinner doesn't have to be gourmet or even homemade food, but there needs to be a time without TV or other electronic devices where there can be continuity of thought and conversation. So much more than just eating takes place at the table. It is the perfect place to teach manners, values, conflict resolution, and language skills. Try to eat dinner together whenever possible, and if it is not possible, at least set aside another time during the day to check in with each other. Ask information questions with words like "what", "why", "when", "who", instead of asking yes/no questions like, "Do you like your classes?" NEVER ask "What did you do at school today?" We all know that the answer to that question is "nothing!".

Play games at the table like talking about what the best or worst thing was that happened during the day. A fun activity that my family used to do was to have each member draw a diagram of another family member's brain, labeling compartments with categories of subjects that occupy their thoughts. For example: Dad's brain was divided into: work, the gym, photography, football, etc. That activity was always good for a few laughs! It is always nice to have each member state what quality that they most appreciate about other family members. This activity can have a really positive effect on relationships between family members. If you run out of ideas, you can buy conversation cards like "Table Talk" or "Table Topic" (Amazon.com) and have a different member choose a card each night.

If teens are doing well in school and communicate with you, you can agree on a reasonable amount of time that they may use the computer, I-phone, etc. If your teens are not achieving at school or not communicating with you, negotiate a reasonable amount of time for technology, which will increase with academic or behavioral improvements. The agreement needs to be signed by you and your teen to have a lasting effect.

In Europe, most families are not experiencing the social skills challenges that we are with our youth. Why? Dinner time with family is not negotiable. Bringing electronics, phones to the table or having the TV on during dinner is not on their radar. It is simply not done.

By making an effort to increase communication, you are saving yourself and your family many problems. Teens who regularly communicate with their families have less drinking and drug problems, and a lower suicide rate. They also do better academically in school. Enable your child to have the skills it will take to be a good communicator. You will not regret it!

Ten Things Which Parents Can Do to Encourage Social Skills in Their Teens

1. Be a good social role-model for your teen by participating in social activities in your neighborhood, community, and/or church.
2. Host events in your home. Don't shy away from this if you are not a great cook. Keep it simple. Have a pot luck dinner and have everyone bring something. Have your teens help you clean the house and prepare the food. You will find out all sorts of information about your teen's friends.
3. Show your child how to welcome someone into your home. Show your child how to greet family friends, relatives, and neighbors. Remind them to always offer someone something to drink if they come to visit.
4. Show your child how to be a good friend. Be there for your friends when the "chips are down" and your child will learn to be a good friend from your example.
5. Show an appreciation for people who are different than you. Be sure to include a variety of people in your social group, so that your teen will feel comfortable with diversity and feel enriched by all the different people, which you have in your life.
6. Show you teen how to handle a difference of opinion with others in a respectful manner. Don't put down people who have different political, religious, or cultural points of view.
7. Never underestimate the importance of the family dinner at the table with the TV off and the family disconnected from computers, phones, i-pods, i-pads, etc. Children learn communication skills (listening and verbal), etiquette, tolerance, self-discipline, how to encourage one another, facts about nutrition, as well as how to have fun without technology. Have members ask to be excused at the end of dinner, rather than allowing them to graze. This may be challenging in a one parent home, but set the expectation of doing this and it will become a tradition.
8. Role-play what to do in certain situations such as an interview, a party, a formal dinner, asking a teacher for help, etc.
9. Discuss current events with your family, so that your children feel connected to people living outside of their immediate area.
10. Volunteer to help others who are less fortunate to encourage compassion in your child.

You will find that teens who learn to be socially appropriate with their families go on to be socially appropriate in society in general, enabling us all to live in a more civilized world.

How Do You Engage Your Teen in Conversation?

Do you feel like you are hitting your head against a brick wall when you try to talk to your teen? Do you get yes/no answers and an occasional grunt when you start a conversation? Many parents face this dilemma.

First of all, it is very useful to ask open-ended questions such as: "What do you think about _____?" You can fill in the blank with a movie, a current event, book, or something that is going on at school. You can also ask, "How do you feel about _____" (name an issue that is a hot topic). Questions that begin with "how", "why" or "what do you think (feel) about", elicit more than one word answers.

Asking thought-provoking questions should begin when children are young, so they can learn how to be good listeners and express their opinions in an appropriate manner. Children not only improve social skills by during these discussions, but also improve their grammar and vocabulary, which has benefits in their academic life.

Another important social skill which should be learned during discussions with family is that teens need to ask others questions instead of just answering questions. I often hear parents ask their teens how their day was without the teen reciprocating by asking how the parent's day was. In the outside world, this is considered self-centered and rude. Teens need to be made aware the world doesn't revolve around them. Imparting this concept can be accomplished by having the parent ask, "Would anyone like to know about my day?" or "Would anyone like to know what happened to me at work today?"

Good conversation is the art of asking good questions and showing concern and empathy for the other person. This can be developed in children by having them ask the parent or siblings questions. Sometimes children feel self-conscious about speaking about certain topics. It is great to start these conversations in the car, with the door locked, going 60 mph. When kids are a captive audience and they do not have to make eye contact, it is amazing what they will share with you!

If you have trouble coming up with conversation topics, you can order a set of cards from Amazon.com such as "Table Topics" or "Teen Table Topics" to jumpstart your conversations. A different family member can choose a card each time and be the conversation leader. It is surprising what you can learn about your child and what they will learn about you, when you truly engage them in conversation. You might find out how much you have in common or how different you are, but what is important is that you bonding and connecting with your child!

Boomerang Kids

Are you experiencing a child who has left home only to return? Maybe you live with the fear that your child will never leave home.

What is going on here? Preparing your child to leave home is one of the most important jobs which a parent has. From the time a child is born, our natural tendency is to smooth the path for our child, so that he or she can thrive. Are we really helping our children thrive by making things easier for them?

Think about the obstacles which you have had in your life. Didn't they make you more resilient and capable? Don't we want our children to be more resilient and capable? There is a difference between enabling and empowering. It is important to give our kids the basics, so that they can succeed, but when we do things for them, it is counterproductive to them being independent.

We obviously don't want to make things difficult for our children, but we need to challenge our children to be resourceful. We encourage independence by guiding them, rather than doing for them. Teens have better self-esteem and more self-reliance when everything is not planned and choreographed for them.

The happiest individuals are those who know how to get their work done and then entertain themselves. These kids feel satisfaction of earning their own grades, earning money by working after school, helping their community through volunteering, and creating their own social life.

Setting expectations and boundaries is important in a parent-child relationship. Teens need to grow up knowing that it is expected that they either get training in a trade or go to college, so that they can support themselves. Obviously, home is there for tough times such as transitioning from school to work or if they have a period of unemployment. It needs to be clear, however, what the financial expectation is while living at home temporarily. Expectations and rules of the house need to be discussed in advance, so each party is clear on the arrangement.

Sometimes if home is too cushy, children are not too motivated to seek employment. So, it is essential to have all conditions of the arrangement thoroughly discussed such as chores, finances, time limit, and any other details which could cause tension in your relationship.

With clarity of expectations and support, children can learn to be independent and self-reliant. One of the greatest pleasures in life is having a positive adult relationship with your child.

Parenting with Boundaries

Good parenting empowers children to realize their full potential. When parents give their children age-appropriate boundaries, children realize that they need to control themselves and that there are consequences to inappropriate behavior. Children who do not grow up with boundaries are in for a rude awakening when they enter college and the workplace and they suddenly have to deal with rules and regulations.

Do you know a lot of bosses who give “extra chances”? I don’t often see that! Kids need to get used to the idea that they need to respect the rules and if they do not, they can expect consequences.

Parents not only need to be on the same page, but they need to be on the same page in the same book. Providing a united front gives children a consistent message. Children will often go to one parent (usually the more lenient one), and ask permission to do something. If that parent is aware, they will tell the child that he/she will check with the other parent before giving permission for anything significant.

Children who have consistent parenting have less disciplinary problems in school and on the job because respect for authority has been instilled in them from an early age. They transition more easily to other situations where there are other rules and boundaries. They often take responsibility for their actions if they have been brought up with rules and consequences. They know that the world does not revolve around them, although they have good self-esteem.

Believe it or not, children feel more secure when they have boundaries, although they may protest them. Would you allow your child to ride in a car without a seatbelt? No way! How about if your young child tells you that he/she think that they can swim and they want to swim in the deep end of the pool? No good parent would do that! So, how is that different than when a child begs you to something which you know is not in their best interest.

You actually make your child’s life easier by providing boundaries early in life. In this way, the transition to managing the teen years will be less stressful. You will also raise children who will become a good parent and pass on the tradition of boundaries to their children.