**Why Adolescence Is More Brutal for Parents Than Teenagers -- New York Magazine**

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**The Collateral Damage of a Teenager**

**What adolescence does to adolescents is nowhere near as brutal as what it does to their parents.**

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| (Photo: Matt Hoyle. Makeup by Susan Donoghue for Ennis Inc. (Parents) and David Tibolla for Celestine Agency (Teen). Hair by Carrie Butterworth at Ennis inc. for Curlisto (Parents) and David Tibolla for Celestine agency (Teen). Styling by Ellen Silverstein. Casting by Matthew Wulf Casting. ) |

It’s a warm evening in Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn, and six mothers, all connected through the usual ties (work, kids, community groups), are clustered around a kitchen table, discussing their adolescents. Beth, a public-school teacher and the youngest of the lot, mentions that her 15-year-old, Carl, has lately “been using his intelligence for evil.”

The women all stop talking and look at her.

“Instead of getting good grades, he figures out how to get around the administrator,” she says, referring to the software she’d installed to regulate his computer use. “And then I see, like, three inputs for ‘Russian whore.’ ”

Or so I thought she said when I first transcribed the tape. When I followed up with Beth sometime later, she informed me that I’d misheard: It was “*three-input* Russian whore.”

At any rate, Samantha, who also teaches at a public school, dives in at this moment with the force of a cannonball. “Take the freaking computer, Beth!” she cries. “Take it!”

“He has to use it. They turn things in online.”

“Put a desktop in the kitchen,” suggests Deirdre, the hostess of the evening.

“That’s what we did,” says Beth. “We put it in the living room.”

“But if he flunks out of school, Beth,” says Samantha, “what’s going to happen?”

“He’s not going to flunk out.” Then she pauses and considers. “Though when I called his therapist and said, ‘I found hours’ worth of porn on his computer,’ the therapist had no idea.”

“Yeah, but I’ve had that too,” says Gayle, a substitute teacher, quite suddenly. She has, until now, said little. All heads swing her way. “Mae”—her daughter and the best friend of Samantha’s oldest, Calliope—“was in therapy and spent a year’s worth of my money not talking to the therapist about the real issue, which is that she was cutting herself.”

Samantha finally gives in. She puts her elbows on the table, bows her head, and rests her brow in her hands. “Everyone’s in the same club,” she says. “Everyone has the same stories.” She looks up at the group. “I mean, please. I have *police* stories.”

*Police stories?* All along, as Samantha’s friends had been speaking, I’d been under the impression that she’d been spared these misadventures and was even a tad scandalized by them. Yet it turned out to be the opposite. She’d been identifying from the start.

When prospective mothers and fathers imagine the joys of parenthood, they seldom imagine the adolescent years, which Nora Ephron famously opined could only be survived by acquiring a dog (“so that someone in the house is happy to see you”). Gone are the first smiles and cheerful games of catch. They’ve been replaced by 5 a.m. hockey practices, renewed adventures in trigonometry (secant, cosecant, *what the—?*), and ­middle-of-the-night requests for rides home. And these are the hardships generated by the *good* adolescents.

But here’s the truth of the matter. The children of these women at Deirdre’s table? Also the good adolescents. Almost all attend either fine universities or competitive public high schools; all have well-developed interests and talents. All, in person, come across as self-confident and considerate. These aren’t the kids who flunk out, run away, or get expelled.

Yet their parents are still going half-mad. Which raises a question: Is it possible that adolescence is most difficult—and sometimes a crisis—not for teenagers as much as for the adults who raise them? That adolescence has a bigger impact on adults than it does on kids?

Laurence Steinberg, a psychologist at Temple University and one of the country’s foremost authorities on puberty, thinks there’s a strong case to be made for this idea. “It doesn’t seem to me like adolescence is a difficult time for the kids,” he says. “Most adolescents seem to be going through life in a very pleasant haze.” Which isn’t to say that most adolescents don’t suffer occasionally, or that some don’t struggle terribly. They do. But they also go through other intense experiences: crushes, flirtations with risk, experiments with personal identity. It’s the parents who are left to absorb these changes and to adjust as their children pull away from them. “It’s when I talk to the parents that I notice something,” says Steinberg. “If you look at the narrative, it’s ‘My teenager who’s driving *me* crazy.’ ”

In the 2014 edition of his best-known textbook, *Adolescence,* Steinberg debunks the myth of the querulous teen with even more vigor. “The hormonal changes of puberty,” he writes, “have only a modest direct effect on adolescent behavior; rebellion during adolescence is atypical, not normal.”

For parents, however, the picture is a good deal more complicated. In 1994, Steinberg published *Crossing Paths,* one of the few extensive accounts of how parents weather the transition of their firstborns into puberty, based on a longitudinal study he conducted of more than 200 families. Forty percent of his sample suffered a decline in mental health once their first child entered adolescence. Respondents reported feelings of rejection and low self-worth; a decline in their sex lives; increases in physical symptoms of distress. It may be tempting to dismiss these findings as by-products of midlife rather than the presence of teenagers in the house. But Steinberg’s results don’t seem to suggest it. “We were much better able to predict what an adult was going through psychologically,” he writes, “by looking at his or her child’s development than by knowing the adult’s age.”

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| (Photo: Matt Hoyle. Hair and makeup by David Tibolla for Celestine Agency. Styling by Ellen Silverstein. ) |

A parent’s experience of his or her children’s adolescence can be exacerbated by any number of factors. One is being divorced. (Married parents have a much easier time as their kids enter puberty.) Another is having a child of the same sex. (The conflicts between mothers and daughters are especially intense.) Steinberg has also found that adolescence is especially rough on parents who don’t have an outside interest, whether it’s a job they love or a hobby, to absorb their attention. It’s as if the child, by leaving center stage, redirects the spotlight onto the parent’s own life, exposing what’s fulfilling about it and what is not.

All children, of course, have the potential to unmask problems parents hadn’t recognized or consciously acknowledged for years. Yet adolescent children seem to have this effect on their mothers and fathers far more than, say, children of 6. So one has to ask: Why?

There are many explanations, obviously. But perhaps the most basic, and ultimately gratifying, is historical: Adolescence is a modern idea. Yes, it’s a physiologically distinct phenomenon, too, accompanied by discernible biological changes. But it was “discovered” in the middle of the Progressive Era (in 1904, specifically, by the educator Stanley Hall), which happened to be the same moment the nation was passing myriad laws to protect its young. For the first time, parents were obliged to shelter and support older children, rather than rely on them as wage earners. And what they concluded, after observing these kids for extended periods of time at close range, is that their teenagers were going through a terrible period of “storm and stress.” How else could parents explain all the chaos and restlessness they were witnessing?

But it could simply be that the advent of the modern childhood, a fully protected childhood, is especially problematic for parents as their children get older. Keeping teenagers sheltered and regimented while they’re biologically evolving into adults and pining for autonomy can have exhausting consequences. The contemporary home becomes a place of perpetual liminal tension, with everyone trying to work out whether adolescents are grown-ups or kids. Sometimes the father thinks the answer is one thing while the mother thinks the answer is another; sometimes the parents agree but the child does not. Whatever the answer—and it is usually not obvious—the question generates stress, and it’s often the parents, rather than the children, who suffer most.

Though she is wearing her workout clothes, you can still make out the hippie that Samantha once was—she’s got a gorgeous gray mane of hair, which she has just let loose from her ponytail following her run. We are sitting in her kitchen in Ditmas Park. Samantha and her husband, who also teaches in the city public schools, had had the good sense to buy a place here nineteen years ago, when the getting was still cheap by city standards ($234,500) and the neighborhood more diverse. Samantha is African-American. Bruce is “the whitest guy ever,” according to Calliope, their daughter. Calliope is a fierce beauty, now 20 years old and home from college for the summer. She joins us at the kitchen table.

“Which bagel?” asks Samantha.

Calliope looks at her with a combination of irritation and affection. “Um, do you know me?” (As in: *How many times have I eaten bagels with you?*)

Samantha rolls her eyes, grabs one, begins to slice.

Calliope’s family started calling her “Alpha,” as in “Alpha girl,” when she was still in high school and was, to put it mildly, very certain about what she wanted. Perhaps because they both have forceful personalities, Samantha and her daughter clashed a lot while Calliope was still living at home. At Deirdre’s house, Samantha had recounted one particularly harrowing fight between the two of them, though she never mentioned what started it. Today I ask. Samantha isn’t even certain she remembers. But Wesley, her 16-year-old son, does—he’s joined us at the table—and leaps right in.

“Well, Calliope had a high-school essay due the next day, and a college essay due in a month. So you”—he looks at his mother—“wanted her to work on the college essay, but you”—now he looks at his sister—“wanted to work on the essay due the next day. So you basically said, ‘Mom, back off, I need to do this essay tonight.’ ” He tells this story with admirable evenhandedness. “And you”—Wesley looks at his mother again—“were trying to emphasize your point that the college essay needed to be done.”

Samantha waits. But that’s it, apparently.

“You just went back and forth like that for a long time,” says Wesley. “And then Dad stepped in.”

Samantha looks puzzled. “That’s so stupid. Why would I not want her to do her essay for the next day?”

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Wesley again responds with tact. “Well,” he says, “in hindsight, you can understand her perspective. But at the time, you wanted to be heard.”

This argument, like so many arguments, wasn’t about much. It was what roiled beneath the surface that had clearly upset Samantha. She had ideas about her daughter’s priorities, but her daughter had different ideas, and Samantha could feel her authority slipping away. She could also detect a hint of mockery in Calliope’s replies. Samantha hates being mocked.

“The cursing doesn’t bother me,” she says. “It’s the tone.”

“Or when we say ‘relax,’ ” says Calliope. “Or ‘chill.’ ”

Samantha springs up from her chair. “Yes! Oh my God.” She starts pacing. “It’s so minimizing. Like, ‘You’re not important.’ ”

The conventional wisdom about parenting adolescents is that it’s a repeat of the toddler years, dominated by a cranky, hungry, rapidly growing child who’s precocious and selfish by turns. But in many ways the struggles that mothers and fathers face when their children hit puberty are the opposite. When children are small, all parents crave is a little time and space for themselves; now they find themselves wishing their children liked their company more and would at least treat them with respect, if adoration is too much to ask.

What makes this transition even harder is how starkly it contrasts with the reasonably tranquil period that preceded it. The *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence* goes so far as to say that adolescence “is second only to infancy” in terms of the upheaval it generates, destabilizing dynamics, rituals, and a well-maintained hierarchy that’d been in place throughout most of elementary school. After years of feeling needed by their children—and experiencing their children’s love as almost inseparable from that need—mothers and fathers now find it impossible to get their kids’ attention.

I ran across a remarkably meticulous study from 1996 that managed to quantify the decline in time adolescents spend with their families. It followed 220 working- and middle-class children from the Chicago suburbs, once when they were in grades five through eight, and again when they were in grades nine through twelve. At each interval, the researchers spent a week paging these kids at random, asking them to identify what they were doing. What they found, 16,477 beeps later, was that between fifth and twelfth grades, the proportion of waking hours that children spent with their families dropped from 35 to 14 percent.

It takes a lot of ego strength for a parent to withstand this separation. It means ceding some power to your children, for one thing—decisions that were once under your purview move to theirs—and it means receding somewhat, accepting that they’ve recast their lives without you, or your goals, at the center. “The adolescent,” writes Adam Phillips, the British psychoanalyst, “is somebody who is trying to get himself kidnapped from a cult.” Parents go from their kids’ protectors to their jailers, and they are then told repeatedly what a drag this is.

Indeed, one of the most striking measures of how critical kids are of their parents at this stage can be found in Ellen Galinsky’s *Ask the Children,* an inspired survey of over 1,000 kids in grades three through twelve. At one point, Galinsky asked her interviewees to grade their parents. In almost every category, seventh- to twelfth-graders rated their parents considerably less favorably than did younger children.

Ingratitude is already one of the biggest heartaches of child-rearing. (“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.” Right?) While not all researchers agree that adolescents fight more than younger children, almost all concur that they fight with more vehemence and skill, arguing most intensely with their parents between eighth and tenth grades.

Nancy Darling, an Oberlin psychologist, offers a nuanced analysis of what, precisely, makes the adolescent struggle for autonomy so contentious. Most kids, she notes, have no objections when their parents try to enforce moral standards or societal conventions. *Don’t hit, be kind, clean up, ask to be excused*—all this is considered fair game. The same goes for issues of safety: Kids don’t consider it a boundary violation if they’re told to wear seat belts. What children object to are attempts to regulate more personal preferences, matters of taste: the music they listen to, the entertainments they pursue, the company they keep. When children are young, these personal preferences don’t tend to cause parents too much anxiety because they’re mostly benign. *Barney*? Annoying, but unobjectionable. That little boy across the way? A little rowdy, but a decent kid.

The problem, says Darling, is that during adolescence questions of preference start to bleed into questions of morality and safety, and it often becomes impossible to discern where the line is: *That kid you’re hanging out with? I don’t like how he drives or the stuff he’s introducing you to. Those games you’re playing? I don’t like all the violence and disgusting messages they’re sending about women.* Maybe more poignantly, being your teenager’s protector has the convenient advantage of keeping your child close, just as he or she is trying to pull away.