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The Good Enough Teen
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An Interview With Dr. Brad Sachs

How do we handle our teenager's constant complaining?

It's important to remember is that he's entitled to be unhappy with his life, but that doesn't mean that you have to provide a willing audience for his grouching and grumbling. While you can understand he may be dealing with some difficult matters, it's fair to ask that he keep his negativity to himself or share it with others besides his parents. If his complaining has become chronic, try to ascertain whether there might be some underlying issues that are truly troubling him. Sometimes kids complain about trivial matters just to blow off steam, but they may also be covering up more serious concerns. Be sure to observe your own and other family members' behavior and see if there might be ways in which you are unintentionally contributing to his dour outlook. Finally, take note of his interactions with others. Many adolescents appear one way in the home, and quite differently outside of the home. It's possible that he reserves all of his bellyaching for his family, in which case, it's more a matter of patiently tolerating his gloom until he leaves home or grows out of it, whichever comes first.

What role should we be playing when it comes to our teenager's homework?

At this point in your child's life, your job is to begin weaning him from your supervision, and to use the next couple of years of high school to promote his capacity to handle his work autonomously — whether he goes on to college, the military, or straight into the work world, functioning independently will be a necessary skill for him to have developed. Unless you begin this process now, it's unlikely he'll be where he should be by the time he graduates high school, and he's certainly not going to have you there on a daily basis to help him manage when he's on his own. Let him know that it's time for a shift to be made, and that he needs to take more personal responsibility for his homework. I would ask him how much time he believes his homework should take, on the average, and check in with his teachers as well, if you have not already done so, to get a sense of what their expectations are (you can probably glean this from the school's website as well). Solicit his input on when he thinks he is most productive, and make that his standard homework time. It should be clear that there are to be no other distractions during this time — no phone, computer, music, television. I would also tell him that while you're available to help him should he want to consult with you, you're no longer going to check up on his work unless he'd like you to. With these changes, be prepared not only for a lack of improvement, but even for a temporary decline in his productivity. However, I believe that, over time, this is the best way to promote his commitment to his own work.

How do we handle our belief that our teenager is stuck in a dead-end relationship?

While it's not a bad idea to see if you can help rock them out of their rut, especially if it's not a particularly contentious or problematic relationship, you shouldn't feel compelled to intervene, particularly if she's not complaining all that much about it, nor should you underestimate the important role the relationship may be playing in their lives. After all, it may be functioning as a stabilizing rudder that is keeping them in check, and actually preventing problems. It's not unusual for teens to link up with a steady partner in an effort to help steady the ship while they're navigating turbulent waters. Make sure she knows that you understand the significance of this relationship. Also be sure that you're differentiating her life from your life, too, because all of us are prone to merging our own experience with our teen's. Credit her with what she's been able to create with him, encourage them to open things up a little bit, and let one or both of them decide when it might be time to consider moving on.

How do we convince our daughter that we're proud of her accomplishments when she insists that we're not?

The next time she brings something like this up, I'd ask her what it's like for her to sense that you're not proud of her, why and how that matters to her. I'd invite her to assess her own level of pride, and inquire as to when she's proudest, and least proud, of herself. She needs to hear that your pride in her is balanced by a realistic appraisal of what she is, and is not, capable of doing — that will enable her to trust you more when you do offer approval and acclaim. And she of course needs to be reminded that that you're always going to love her no matter what combination of flaws and attributes she embodies, so that she doesn't have to feel ashamed of, and compelled to hide away, the downside of her life. Remember that your goal here is not to offer her some falsely blanket reassurance regarding how proud of her you are, but to convey to her your interest in becoming more aware of who she's already become, and will continue becoming. That, in the long run, will help to promote her growth a good deal more than endless praise and accolades.

How do we provide responsible sex-education during late adolescence?

Because of our understandable desire to prevent STD's and unwanted pregnancies, adolescent sex-education can wind up taking on a negative bent — sexuality is often presented in worrisome terms, and is seen as a threat, a pitfall, a reckless and impending disaster, rather than as a beautifully complicated but ultimately wondrous universe to be explored and experienced throughout the entire course of one's lifetime. When teens are told that "the only safe sex is abstinence", while simultaneously being inundated with sexual advertisements and enticements, and feeling the insistent tug of their own sexual urges, how are they then supposed to explore their sexuality? You need to deepen the conversation that you have with them about sexuality, and move it into the emotional as much as the physical realm. They need to know that they can talk about the mixture of feelings that they have about sexuality, that it needn't be seen as "all good" or "all bad". They need to understand the diversity of sexual expressiveness, the vast territory within which sexual energy can articulate and reveal itself. And to help them with this, they even need to know more about how you have navigated this territory, both when you were their age, as well as now. This doesn't mean that you have to go into excruciating detail with them about what you do or don't do in bed (they will have left the room long before you'd get to that point!), but it does mean that you have to clue them into the nature of the lifelong continuum of sexuality. Broadening your discussion of sexuality in these ways will not only help to educate them, but, more importantly, enlighten them, and leave them better equipped to find a safe, healthy and fulfilling mutuality with

their chosen partner.

How do we handle our teenager's insistence on repudiating our values?

Most teens who are given a respectful opportunity to express their opinions and freely experiment with different options and possibilities during adolescence and early adulthood eventually make decisions which are primarily guided by their own, unique vision of themselves, but that still incorporate and integrate aspects of the original vision provided for them by their parents, as well as the visions of other influential peers and mentors. Despite being driven by a healthy urge to distinguish themselves and cover new ground, they will at some point vanquish the fear that their sense of self is imperiled simply because some of what they go after in life might actually be approved of by their parents. With this in mind, as long as his choices are not self-destructive, I would suggest understanding and appreciating his courageous efforts to formulate a unique blueprint for his life, and trusting that his current defiance-based course will eventually be guided by other winds as well.

How do we handle our teenager's lack of interest in sex?

Sexual development occurs at its own pace: puberty can continue well into one's early twenties, and some teens may still be awaiting some natural physical and/or emotional changes that will be harbingers of a more overt sexual expressiveness. If he has experienced any psychological or physical injuries or traumas in the past, such as sexual or physical abuse, accidents, or surgeries, these could also be contributing to a temporary forestalling of his sexual evolution. However, don't neglect the possibility that, for whatever reasons, he's successfully attempting to keep his sexuality "under wraps". You cannot presume that he's "asexual" simply because you have not yet witnessed any concrete evidence of sexual interest. Adolescents are quite inventive when it comes to masking or concealing their sexuality, and a teen who does so wouldn't be the first or last who was able to keep his erotic explorations, be they personal or interpersonal, private. It can be valuable to broker a discussion with him about his sexuality in a gentle and non-judgmental way. You might begin by asking him if many of his friends seem to have much of an interest in physical intimacy (I'd be careful not to ask if his friends are interested in the "opposite sex" in case part of the reason that he may be shying away from sexual matters is because he thinks he is, or may in fact be, gay). Reassure him that celibacy, for any length of time, is a legitimate choice, that he should never feel abnormal if he's not interested in sex nor succumb to any pressure to have sex, and that sex is most enjoyable, and most gratifying, when it takes place in the context of a loving, trusting relationship. Approaching the issue in this way will probably reduce whatever anxiety or uneasiness either of you may be experiencing, and increase the likelihood that he'll be that much better able to allow his sexual energies to gradually materialize in a healthy and fulfilling manner.

How do we respond when our teenager makes comments with a suicidal tone?

Suicide is the second leading cause of death, after accidents, for American adolescents. Adolescents are vulnerable to suicide because they tend to be impulsive, and because they do not know that the feelings of anguish and despair that they are wrestling with are temporary ones. Fearing that they will be oppressed forever by their despondency, they tend to look for an exit that will provide them with instant relief, not fully understanding the true significance and irreversibility of the suicidal escape route. Amongst the adolescents that I work with, the most salient predictor of self-destructive action is unresolved family difficulties. Teens who have made suicidal comments or gestures invariably experience their families as deeply conflicted, characterized either by open hostility or barely suppressed contention. Meaningful communication has broken down, having been replaced by constant quarreling, tense silence, or superficial chatter. There is a pervasive feeling of disorganization and contradiction within the family, a state of perpetual crisis that seems never to be ameliorated. These struggling young adults have usually been sending repeated signals about their disheartened hopelessness to their parents for some time, signals that have been ignored, minimized or incorrectly decoded. Many of my suicidal patients also feel as if their parents' expectations for them can never be met — their inability to save their parents' marriage, for example, or to be sparkingly proficient at everything that they do, leave them feeling as if they are abject failures. Even if you believe his comments are an attention-getting mechanism, the question still needs to be asked, "Why would talk of suicide be his way of getting attention?" Usually, this choice suggests that the family is in some serious disrepair, and not functioning well enough to maintain the teen's sense of value and self-worth. If your son has expressed these thoughts more than once, you should immediately consult with a mental health professional to see what's on his mind, to help him to regulate his moods, and to help you to find ways to bolster the family so that it more effectively supports and maintains his well-being.