

Repairing Broken Mirrors: Working With Adolescents Through the Parents

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I do my best therapy with teens by doing therapy with parents. Although I have developed great relationships over the years with the adolescents I have worked with, the greatest leverage and greatest satisfaction level comes from helping the parents “get” their kid in a new and more productive way.

Parents matter. Not only because of the decisions they make or the strategies they use, but also because of the way in which the adolescent’s sense of self is shaped by the mirroring of parents. Teens who claim that they are autonomous and don’t care what their parents think or how they are being viewed by them are lying through their teeth.

In working with parents as way to get through to teens, I have found the following three guidelines—mantras for parents—to be clinical pearls.

PEARLS

Pearl #1. It’s not your child’s job to make you feel good about yourself.

Every parent is a sucker for this. Self psychology theory highlights how the *mirroring selfobject* plays a primary role in developing and maintaining a cohesive sense of self. The response from the other, the “object,” serves as a mirror reflecting back a picture of the individual—positive or negative, worthy or unworthy, valuable or degraded.

We usually think of this process in terms of how children are affected by parents or how clients are affected by therapists. But this particular pearl identifies the way it happens in reverse. Parents, too, rely on their kids to make them feel good about themselves. They shouldn’t, but they do. The child is selfobject mirror to the adult. The dysfunctionality of this mirroring process from child to parent leads parents to overreact to the behaviors, achievements, mood states, and even core personalities of their kids. It’s as if the parent is constantly scanning the behavior of the child and secretly asking the question: *What does this say about me?* And thus the parent is extremely vulnerable to narcissistic injuries when the child fails at a task, acts shy at a birthday party, doesn’t keep his or her room clean, or simply voices autonomous opinions. The conclusion of this sequence, far too often, is that the parent aggressively turns against the child or teen for making the parent feel ineffective or anxious.

I remember the story of a second-grade teacher who felt chronically ineffective in his work. Furthermore, his 5-year-old daughter was clearly a handful, as 5-year-old daughters tend to be. One day he came home and her toys were scattered throughout the house. He told her to pick them up, and she ignored him. He raised his voice and told her again, and she had a 5-year-old smartass answer. Then he picked her up and sat her on her bed, screaming at her that she had better listen to him, *now!*

His next words, in relating this story in his marital therapy session, have always stuck with me: “I let these second-grade kids run all over me all day long, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let that happen in my own home!” It was all about him. When he heard himself say these words out loud, in front of his concerned wife and me, he started to cry. He told us that it just sounded so pathetic.

The message for parents, of course, is that this psychological process is normal and human—and quite dangerous. The more that parents can recognize (with full emotional honesty) how they are overreacting to their kids as mirrors to themselves, the greater capacity they have to keep it in check.

Pearl #2. The story you tell yourself about your teen makes all the difference.

As humans, we are hardwired to form coherent narratives about the events in our lives, and parents are always telling themselves a story about their kids. Like all stories, they are merely subjective versions of the facts. These narratives are based on a thousand historical factors and years of social conditioning, sometimes extremely valuable and sometimes extremely distorted.

When a teenager withdraws, the parents have to develop a story to explain this. *Is he clinically depressed? Is he purposely being disrespectful and ungrateful? Is this normal teenage behavior? Is he on drugs? Is this a healthy sign of separation, setting the stage for individuation? Is there something wrong with us?!*

Family therapist Jane Nelsen has advised parents this way: “Count on teenagers to be obnoxious. Step back and try to see it as cute” (Nelsen, J., & Lott, L., 1994, p. 149). That requires a new narrative, and it makes a difference. As any cognitive therapist or narrative therapist will tell you (or, for that matter, any analyst who focuses on cognitions), a new story has a profound impact on the emotional reaction of the parent and on the decisions the parent makes in choosing how to respond—or whether to respond at all.

Furthermore, teens can sense how their parents perceive them. Some parents don’t quite believe this, but it can have a profound effect when the parent visualizes the teen in a positive way, with a positive aura and with a positive vision of the future for this young person. Maybe it’s psychological, maybe it’s cosmic, maybe it’s just a way of calming the parent. But I know that when I assign parents the task of writing 10 things they are grateful for about their son or daughter, things often improve.

Pearl #3. Nothing works always.

The most important rule about parenting is that there are no true rules. There are guidelines, which in general seem to work reasonably well most of the time with many kids and many families. But that’s about as definitive as we can be, and when parents rigidly adhere to a parenting strategy they often stifle their own creativity and fail at the task.

This reminds me of a story I once heard from the mother of a son. She had learned, from reading all the best books, that the preferred way to help build true self-esteem in kids was to say “Wow, you should feel really proud of yourself!” instead of “I feel so proud of you!” One day, when her son was 14, she said this preferred sentence to him and he looked at her, vulnerable and stricken, and said, “How come you never tell me that *you’re* proud of me?” She explained her philosophy, reassured him of her pride in him—and was reminded that no advice about raising kids is always right.

CASE EXAMPLE: STUART

Stuart was the father in a family I was treating in family therapy because of ongoing conflicts between the parents and their 13-year-old daughter, Megan. At the time of the incident I am about to describe, I had been seeing them in one combination or another (a couple of times all together, one time with just Megan alone, but most of the time with just

Stuart and his wife) for about 3 months, maybe eight sessions total. The most powerful sessions were those with the parents. Family-systems models inform us that change anywhere generates change (or at least disequilibrium) elsewhere. In this case, the parents' issues (particularly Stuart's) were the lever.

Stuart felt powerless—not only in managing his two kids, 13 and 11, but throughout the rest of his life as well. He came by these feelings honestly. Injured in Vietnam, he had lost a leg. He had spent many of the subsequent 30 years fighting with various VA clinics about problems with his prosthetic leg. He felt frustrated and helpless. In his job, he felt insignificant: He was low on the totem pole, not earning the respect that a man of his age and experience should have.

One day he came home from work to the wailing of Megan. Apparently, Megan's "best friend" had been spreading rumors accusing her of some sort of promiscuous sexuality. Stuart listened to his wife as she told him what had triggered all this. And he came up with a plan, in the spirit of being a good father who feels the pain of his kids and wants to do everything he can to come through for them when they are hurting.

Stuart announced his plan: "Okay, here's what we're going to do. We're going to call your friend's mother and insist that she get her daughter to apologize. *And she needs to go back to the kids that she told this to and tell them that she made it up and that she is sorry!*"

Megan's response to this plan was to wail "*Nooooo!*" even louder than before, the way only a 13-year-old girl can wail. Stuart's wife turned to him and quietly stated the obvious. "I don't think she wants us to do that."

Stuart's response was to stand up and lay down the law: "I know what I'm doing here. It's time that you all listened to me for once! If you don't go along with my plan, it's a sign that you don't respect me—and I'm outta here!"

Neither wife nor daughter said anything. Stuart stormed out of the house and actually spent the night in a hotel. He came back the next morning rather sheepishly, realizing that he had thrown an adult version of a temper tantrum.

When he had blown up, he didn't know how to recognize what he was going through, or how to name it or express it. He just felt compelled to escape it through a grandiose attempt to feel powerful. He lost his perspective; suddenly the unfolding drama had turned into a drama only about himself.

His daughter's distress (and his family's rejection of his plan) had become a broken mirror, and her drama had become merely a reflection on him. He had not been capable of recognizing that this was actually a potential *twins*hip (another form of selfobject) and bonding experience. In reality, they were all feeling powerless together.

To his credit, Stuart—a good man behaving badly if there ever was one—understood soon afterward what had happened. **This was the most important issue for Stuart to come to grips with: His daughter's unhappiness and his family's reluctance to adopt his plan was not a referendum on him** (*Pearl #1. It's not your child's job to make you feel good about yourself*). He came to realize how vulnerable he was to feeling ineffective; he had simply become unbearably overwhelmed with feelings of powerlessness.

I approached Stuart in this situation utilizing the fundamental principles of "pacing and leading" as originally developed by Milton Erickson. I needed to demonstrate my profound respect of the broken-mirror experience (the "pacing" part) and still help guide him toward a more productive way of viewing himself, his family, and his life story (the

“leading” part). I said to Stuart: “I can only imagine how painful it must have been for you to see Megan hurting so much—because I know you love your daughter very much. And you are a good man, with good values, and you really want to be the type of man who can protect his family and the people he loves. You must have felt so damn helpless seeing her in such distress and not knowing how to make it better. And you have had plenty of experience with feeling helpless in your life.

“And this is a time when it makes sense to remember that no man can always fix his family’s problems—that this is not a reflection on your manhood or your worth as a father. This is a time to pull out of your hat the parenting response that fits the situation. This situation called for simple empathy and simple patience. Those are the manly responses sometimes. I know you can do that.”

When Stuart realized how many of his own issues and needs he was bringing to the table in these everyday family dramas, he developed one of the most valuable skills in parenting. He was able to access his observing ego and watch what was happening to him and others, then generate a response based on these observations.

Stuart had panicked when he told himself the wrong story about this incident. His initial narrative, computed in milliseconds as narratives generally are (although the blueprint takes a lifetime to develop), told him not only that his self-worth as a father was at stake, but also that his daughter was at great risk and could not recover from this trauma without his active intervention. In reality, she was over it 24 hours later and proved, again, to be considerably more resilient than this worried father realized.

Stuart’s wife coached him on this: “You need to trust Megan more. I know she seems so wild and so emotional a lot, but it all blows over really quickly. Half the time, when we do nothing in response to all her drama, she does just fine. It’s really better that way.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself. **Stuart was projecting his own insecurity and pessimism onto his daughter. Much of his life overwhelmed him; he couldn’t imagine that his daughter was much different, and he thus felt anxiety about her dysphoric emotional states. But her story was different from his, which his wife and I continued to remind him of.** (*Pearl #2. The story you tell yourself about your teen makes all the difference.*)

In this family drama, Stuart was operating on principles he had learned from parenting classes and magazine articles: A good parent should be prepared to take action to help his child. He wanted, understandably, to make sure that his daughter knew that he cared about her enough not just to use active listening but also to take charge of a threat to her well-being.

Good parental values are based on sound generalizations like taking decisive action to protect your children. But nothing works always. **In Stuart’s case, this was a time to reflect and collaborate rather than boldly take intervening action** (*pearl #3*). It turned out that this was a time to trust his daughter’s resiliency rather than to panic because of her immediate (and, as it turned out, temporary) despair and distress.

One thing to be aware of in this case and in working with parents of teens in general: Helping Stuart recognize his own issues and helping him respond more constructively had a significant ripple effect on the family system and on the teen in particular. And no small credit for the eventual success in this case stemmed from Stuart’s ability to take responsibility for his “misbehavior” and directly communicate this to his daughter. This allowed her to be compassionate toward him and see him as a flawed but well-meaning

“good man behaving badly”—not just a clueless and controlling father. This change was worth more than a lot of individual therapy sessions with her could ever have been.

I continued to see this family for several years, and I watched Megan grow and mature. Her father’s increasing self-acceptance and clarity about his daughter, and about his role in her development, helped pave the way.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

For the past 25 years, I have been working on ways to integrate central principles from self psychology with more practical interventions from cognitive-behavioral therapy and solution-oriented psychotherapy. What I know now, more clearly than ever before, is how crucial the experience of a cohesive, confident, and integrated self is to human well-being and to human relationships. Self psychology teaches us that the range of selfobject relationships and experiences is central to maintaining this cohesive self. And most powerful of all is the *mirroring selfobject*, the breakdown of which I refer to as the “broken mirror.” Other selfobject relationships, such as the *idealized selfobject*, the *twinship selfobject*, the *adversarial selfobject*, the *efficacy selfobject*, and so on, enhance this state of self-cohesion. Therapists’ awareness of the power of these selfobject relationships, ability to help clients identify them, and ability to foster them in the therapeutic relationship and in family relationships are crucial.

To my everlasting satisfaction and delight, I have discovered that many previously defended people are surprisingly receptive to identifying and taking responsibility for their own broken mirrors—and to moving forward into a more mature level of functioning as a result. I have seen many parents learn this concept and remind themselves of mantra #1 (*it’s not my child’s job to make me feel good about myself*) with great results.

Integrated into this approach is a deep appreciation of the profound effect that cognitions (story, narrative, beliefs, perspective) have on subsequent emotions and subsequent behaviors. When a parent reframes narratives in a positive (or at least more productive) way, lots of other things fall into place. The bratty child becomes the child who is in a bad mood. The teen who refuses to try harder at anything becomes the teen who is terrified of feeling incompetent or ashamed. The middle-school girl who plays social games is trying to learn about the world of relationships. And the teenager whose room is a mess is meeting his job description—not necessarily predicating a life of sloth.

When the parent thinks like this, he or she is less susceptible to the demons generated by the broken mirror. Better parenting results.

But insight and therapeutic relationships are not the only way to foster self-cohesion. Any experience that enhances these selfobject needs does this job. When it comes to helping parents offer their best possible selves to the teens that need the best from them, it often astonishes me that some of the simplest principles from cognitive-behavioral interventions can have such a powerful effect: active listening, respectful and assertive communication, making “I statements,” positive reinforcement. When their personal issues are interfering less, parents are able to utilize many of these interpersonal behaviors with very rewarding results. Practically anyone can use these—except when broken mirrors or excessive anxieties are getting the way.

Finally, the third pearl of wisdom comes from years of personal and professional experience, especially personal and professional failures. I have been a parent of two kids, now grown, and there were many times that the well-researched approach recommend by

parenting books completely backfired and only a counterintuitive approach got us anywhere. My wife taught me this. Sometimes, when everyone around us would have screamed for discipline and consequences, a simple conversation worked better. At other times, going for soothing, affectively attuned responses to these kids only made things worse. For all of us working with the complexities of helping teens and families, rigid orthodoxy is determined to fail. Respecting the personal experiences and intuitions of both parents and kids, and negotiating creative strategies, should always trump what the rules say—or at least carry a lot of weight.

BIOGRAPHY

David B. Wexler, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in San Diego and the executive director of the nonprofit Relationship Training Institute. He has received the Distinguished Contribution to Psychology award from the California Psychological Association and the Practitioner of the Year award from the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity, a division of the American Psychological Association. Wexler is the author of many books and has appeared on hundreds of radio and television programs throughout North America to help educate the public about relationships in conflict and how to resolve them. He can be contacted through www.RTIprojects.org

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