

Family Life with Teens: Navigating Uncharted Waters.

A series of four articles on adolescence

**by Norbert A. Wetzel
Princeton Family Institute**

Part I: Examining Adolescence at the Interface of Multiple Contexts

John, a freshman with a worn-down demeanor strolls into the therapist's office last in line after his parents and siblings. Months of John's cutting classes prompted the guidance counselor at his suburban high school to refer him for counseling. You would not guess from his appearance that he can get quite abusive if his parents dare to disturb his all night routine of computer games and heavy metal music.

The minute you encounter Kim, a slender sophomore, she lets you know she is a fighter. She insists that she is the problem, that she has no intention to change, and that she is not willing to reveal anything about herself during the family therapy session. The long sleeves of her blouse hide pain indicated by the marks of severe cutting. After an argument with her mother she had disappeared for a week with a classmate.

Or consider Tony's situation, an 8th grader who usually eats lunch in school alone. Brooding and without initiative at home, he somehow managed to connect with a girl in Los Angeles, bought a plane ticket with his father's credit card in a moment of high energy, and was found at the LA airport wandering around dazed and frightened. The bewildered parents were told he has "bi-polar illness", like his uncle.

Nobody ever said that adolescence would be a stress-free time of family life. And parents are quite willing to shoulder the burden as well as the joy of raising children because they love them. Yet, they wonder why it seems so arduous these days to guide teenagers successfully toward adulthood. Family life appears to consist of daily crises and emotional upheavals, of relational conflicts and never ending frustrations between parents and kids.

This is the time when the human bio-physiological maturation takes a quantum leap forward toward adulthood. Parents, educators, therapists and teenagers themselves are aware that this stage of growth denotes change, instability, surprises, unpredictability, and emotional ups and downs.

Some teenagers navigate this transition from the elementary school years of their childhood to the middle and high school years of adolescence quite effortlessly. They do well in school, form solid friendships with peers, develop hobbies, engage in athletics and other extra-curricular activities and seem at ease with who they are and how their life unfolds as it intersects with family, school, and youth environments.

Others get stuck at the interfaces between school, friends, and family as the expectations, group rules, and demands from the various social contexts seem to conflict with increasing intensity. Emotionally draining brawls at home over parental norms, mutual expectations, and frameworks for appropriate behavior are often the consequence. Often, school can become a source of failures and disappointments for the teen and of constant anxiety for the parent. Chances are that the only social context where these youngsters feel accepted are groups of other marginalized young people who eschew any conformity with the adult world and get their affirmation and nurture from belonging to a highly ritualized, hierarchically structured and close network of outsiders with often destructive consequences (groups of alternative youths, gangs, cults).

Even more alarming is the experience of parents who witness their youngster withdrawing into an inner fantasy world, isolating himself from the outside, and/or exhibiting a very confused and “crazy” thought process. Self-injurious behavior (from cutting herself to indiscriminate sexual practices), precipitous weight loss or binge eating, refusal to engage in ongoing interaction with family or friends, almost constant use of the computer (for games, instant messaging, and the internet), reversal of the day and night cycle, wide mood swings, outbursts of anger and restless high energy alternating with apathy and excessive need for sleep, palpably confused thinking processes, and apparent inability to read social clues correctly indicate to the parents that something “is seriously wrong with our child”. From friends, primary care physicians or psychiatrists they hear diagnoses that often indicate life long “mental illnesses”.

The challenging process of growing up is not made easier by the ubiquitous availability of drugs in schools and neighborhoods. Prompted by the stresses of coping with the often contradictory exigencies of adolescence and pulled by the need to fit into the culture of the peer group many already troubled adolescents experiment with drugs and alcohol.

Not surprisingly, many parents conclude that what is happening with their youngsters must be their fault since it does not seem to occur to the families of their neighbors and friends. Consequently, they feel ashamed,

grow isolated in their social network, and do not receive the support that is so crucial for families with teenagers in a time of crisis.

Focusing on parents as the culprits to blame is not only unfair, it also does not lead to any insights as to how to proceed. Nor will an individual diagnosis with the teen as the focal point clarify much for parents who are trying to make sense of what's happening with their family and need to comprehend the complex dynamics of their teenager's relational world.

In the next three installments we will first clarify the complex tasks the developing adolescent has to master during this phase of the family life cycle. We will consider the various bio-physiological, individual, and contextual factors that impact the teenager's life and the diversity of modern family forms – each with special challenges.

We will then focus on therapeutic guidelines and practical resources that may assist parents to navigate this particularly hazardous phase of family life.

Finally, we will examine traumatic developments in the family life with teenagers: Violence, drugs, illness, and madness.