

She Just Doesn't Understand Me

Mothers and Daughters During the Teen Years

by John Samanich, MD

MEN ARE FROM MARS, women are from Venus and adolescents are from Pluto. This is the impression I often get from a parent-child consultation. Is this the norm? To some extent, yes. It would be an understatement, not to mention a cliché, to say that teens and their parents have their differences and this is especially true of mothers and daughters during adolescence.

Adolescence is a unique, and rapid, shift in the dynamic between the teen and her environment. In this environment, a girl's parents are the most prominent figures. As a child grows and develops, her perspective, processing, and understanding of information changes. To complicate this, the world hands out challenges, successes and failures. In the tumult, it is parents who provide a sense of stability in the storm. When life is chaotic, it is instinctive to seek the protection of caregivers, and the confusion can overflow into the parent-child relationship.

During adolescence the teen starts to individuate from her parents and she starts to think formally on her

own. Even though she is trying to function independently, she still requires some guidance, particularly from her mother. Yes, this is 2006, and the roles of males and females in child rearing have become less distinct and compartmentalized, but they do still occur. In addition, there is the inherent difference in gender. As children grow, they identify socially more with the parent of the same gender, as being female or male, so a daughter and her mother share a greater sense of identity with each other than a daughter and her father.

To better understand the mother-daughter relationship, it is important to get a sense of the stages of cognitive and social development of adolescents. Understanding the basics of development gives us some of the tools we need to fix a problem should it arise. The stages of adolescence according to the pioneers in child and adolescent development, including Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson are summarized below.

The basic element in Piaget's theory of cognitive development is the *schema*, or a pattern of behavior in response to

a particular stimulus from the environment. Since the environment is constantly changing around us, we must adjust in order to survive in the new environment. We learn to assimilate changes in the environment into our own schema, and to accommodate or change our responses to create a new equilibrium in order to survive within it.

Prior to adolescence, children are in the *concrete operational stage*. The child at this stage is bound by what is concretely perceived at a given moment. This stage is exemplified by a classic experiment in which water is placed in one beaker and then transferred to a different sized beaker. The child is then asked if the amount of water has changed. Once the child has mastered this concept they move onto the next phase, *the formal operational stage*.

In 1969 Piaget noted that in the formal operational stage "the great novelty that characterizes adolescent thought and that starts around the age of 11 to 12, but probably does not reach its point of equilibrium until the age of 14 or 15, consists in the possibility of manipulating ideas in themselves and no longer in merely manipulating objects." At this point the adolescent has created a mental world that is not tied to the physical world. They can reason, hypothesize and make deductions on their own. Piaget further states, "The most distinctive property of formal thought is this

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reversal of direction between reality and possibility.” The adolescent is able to think independently and make decisions based on both past and present experiences. It is in this phase of cognitive development that the adolescent begins to think independently of her parents and formulate decisions based on her own set of experiences. This is the phase where the adolescent develops the well-known mantra that her parents “don’t know what they’re talking about”.

According to Erikson, each individual has tasks in his/her life to perform from infancy to death. For example, the developmental task for the infant is to achieve adaptation to the outside world, including a physical and mental sense of identity separate from his/her parents. As the child gets older he/she begins to develop a sense of autonomy. This is often in the form of oppositional behavior, the famous “no”, which is a normal part of development. The foundation of the pre-adolescent developmental stage is a move towards greater separation, independence, and autonomy. The degree of success during this stage depends on several factors, in particular the level to which parents facilitate or hinder this progress.

Many of the difficulties between mother and daughter arise during the pre-adolescent developmental stage. The grade school girl continues to identify with her mother but strives to gain some independence from her. Mom, in turn, attempts to provide an opportunity for her daughter to do this but is unsure of how much room to give. At this point the question of “how much to bend” arises. However, there is no specific answer, no crystal ball to help determine the correct course to take. When troubled mothers ask me this question, I recommend being consistent and supportive, and above all to remember that you are still

responsible for your daughter. A daughter may need to make mistakes in order to learn; a mother must make sure that her daughter is able to recover from those mistakes.

This same advice applies to the adolescent stage where the psychological tasks are much more challenging. These tasks include: defining one’s own identity; achieving separation and coming to terms with family; developing love relationships; and achieving mastery over impulses and capacities. This is no easy endeavor. The adolescent girl strives to find her place among her peers, begins to experience romantic feelings for others, and tries to establish her own individual identity in the world. This occurs with the background stresses of the responsibility of academics and social acceptance among peers. And, on top of this, there is the “noise” of our culture through the overload of the media and ever-rapidly expanding information technology. Mothers often say “things were a lot different when I was my daughter’s age”, and the truth is, they were.

This period can be just as confusing to the parents of the adolescent girl, who often suffer the same ups and downs as their daughter. Mothers feel every success and failure of their daughters as if it were their own, and sometimes even to a greater extent. They try to be both parents as well as friends to their daughters. They want to keep their child out of harm’s way but also to maintain an alliance with them; it can also be especially challenging when that line becomes continuously blurred. As life becomes more chaotic for an adolescent, it becomes even more important for a mother to provide a sense of stability. When mother becomes her daughter’s equal instead of her guide at this stage of development, the relationship between the two may deteriorate. So what should a mother do if she feels that her relationship with her daughter is being jeopardized? The first step in

any problem is to realize there is something wrong. Has there been any change in your daughter or in your relationship with her? Does she appear depressed or anxious? Is she spending more time isolated, crying a lot, or being overly self-critical? If you are concerned there is something wrong, there probably is. Don’t be afraid to ask your daughter if she thinks there is a problem. Try to make her understand that you are worried and would like to help. The typical teenage response may be that “everything is fine” but be persistent, without being overwhelming, and have faith in yourself and your relationship. Be the same consistent and supportive parent you have always been. When faced with a crisis or a situation that is not familiar to us, we have a tendency to want to “do something”. We believe that by actively doing something, the crisis will be overcome. In reality, what it does is make us feel some power and control, but it has little or no impact on the outcome.

When should you seek professional help? If an adolescent’s level of functioning begins to deteriorate, if school performance declines drastically, if your daughter becomes socially isolated, and if you suspect drug and alcohol use, and there is a loss of control, professional help should be considered. In all likelihood your daughter will refuse - she will deny there is a problem and that she needs help. It is this time when a parent must step in and make decisions that their daughter cannot make herself. To admit that there is a problem that is beyond your control takes courage. Fortunately the right professional can help you and your daughter get back on track.



John Samanich, MD recently opened an office in Child, Adolescent and General Psychiatry at the Wilkins Center in Greenwich. He can be reached at 531-1030.

Good Nights and Better Mornings

Wake Up Sleepy Teen

by Polly Park Hyman

EVERY DAY AFTER SCHOOL in the fall, fifteen year-old James has a two hour football practice. When he gets home he has a quick dinner before heading up to his room to start on his evening activities including checking emails, IM'ing friends, doing some homework and practicing the saxophone. By 10:30 PM, as James' parents are getting ready to go to bed and are encouraging him to do the same, he still has plenty of energy. Convincing them that he will turn in once he has finished his reading assignment, James says good night to his parents and closes his door.

Since he seems to have everything under control, it is hard for his parents to imagine that he is sleep deprived. What they don't know is that it is hard for James to get going in the morning and is drowsy on the school bus; he needs coffee to perk him up before class begins and even then yawns through the first few hours of the school day and finds it hard to focus. Because he does well in school and in his extra-curricular activities and has time for friends, James is considered to be an average teenager with a busy schedule – and little time for sleep. There are two sides to his personality – at night he has energy for friends, family and activities; during the day he is tired, has low energy and finds it hard to balance his responsibilities.

Just as a growth spurt marks the onset of adolescence, so does a change in sleep pattern. Although teens need more sleep than adults, they are more likely to feel wide awake until late at night and find it easy to sleep later in the morning. This pattern, combined with an early start to the school day, multiple extracurricular activities and around-the-clock technology, is a recipe for sleepy teens.

During Fall 2005 the National Sleep Foundation (NSF) randomly surveyed over 1,500 households across the United States. The poll, compiled by experts on adolescent sleep, asked questions of one family member between the ages of 11 and 17, and one parent or guardian in the same household, in order to compare their responses.

Like James, many of the adolescents and parents surveyed in the NSF's 2006 *Sleep in America* poll, are fooled by what one expert calls the "trick of nature". Adolescents' circadian rhythms change when they go through puberty, so their brains and bodies are geared to stay awake later and sleep in later, but their school schedules are not synchronized with the teens' physical schedules.

Compounding this is the fact that many parents and teens are not aware that the recommended amount of sleep for adolescents is between 8.5 and 9.25 hours every night. The result is that the average teen is in a constant battle with the natural tendency of his brain and body. Many of them are not getting the sleep they need and the consequences are catching up with them in all areas of their lives. Many teens in the poll said that they arrived late for class, fall asleep in class and are too tired to exercise or eat properly.

The poll found that some teens, in an attempt to stay alert during the day, try to cut corners and try to fend off sleepiness, rather than getting the

sleep they need. These unhealthy behaviors include:

Napping: 38% of high school students surveyed took at least two naps per week

Sleeping late on weekends: Most adolescents sleep between one and two hours longer on non-school nights

Consuming caffeinated beverages and foods: 31% of those surveyed drink two or more caffeinated beverages a day

Giving up on exercise: over a quarter of the teens said they were too tired to work out

Driving drowsy: 51% who drive say they have driven while drowsy

These strategies may help the teen cope by just getting through the day but in the long run may intensify

difficulty sleeping, impact school performance and even pose danger to themselves and others.

Results of the poll indicated that the effects of sleep deprivation can also impact mood, attitude and behavior.

Some parents

have a tendency to think that "all teens are moody" and that their natural state is to be irrational and irritable, but lack of sleep can compound feelings of anxiety and depression. The poll used five questions from a recognized mental health questionnaire to measure the outlook and mood of the respondents. Those with the worst mood scores were more than twice as likely to have

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trouble falling asleep and were about three times as likely to say they felt too tired during the day. On a positive note, these sleep-related findings may be used to effectively identify, diagnose and treat children with mood disorders.

While common sense dictates that the sleep environment should conducive to rest and relaxation, the poll found that more than half the high school age teens had cell phones in their bedroom. As more studying and activities compete with a teen's time, checking in with friends on the phone or IM is considered relaxing and restorative but technology, in the form of televisions, computers, cell phones and MP3 players, not only cuts into sleep time but actually invigorates the user and encroaches on a good night's sleep.

The poll highlights a disparity between parents and adolescents' perceptions of sleep problems with 7% of parents thinking their teen has a problem and 16% of adolescents reporting that they have or may have one. An explanation for the disparity may be that Americans, as a society, do not give sleep the attention it deserves. The average American adult gets 6.9 hours of sleep a night, while sleep professionals recommend 7 to 9 hours a night. Another reason is that the two-sided behavior of teens fools parents into believing that their children are getting the rest they need. Late night wakefulness may be interpreted as teen obstinacy, while morning drowsiness might seem normal.

The poll reinforces the fact that teens are caught up in a complex juggling act. With sleep at the bottom of the "to do list", they need to be taught the value of a good night's sleep, how to get it and how to recognize and respond to sleep problems.



Signs and symptoms of sleep deprivation and sleep problems:

1. Your teen has difficulty waking in the morning for school and yawns frequently throughout the day.
2. Your teen has trouble getting out of the door in the morning and is continuously late for class.
3. Your teen needs caffeinated beverages to help him get through the day.
4. Your teen is struggling academically, or a teacher notices that she falls asleep in class periodically.
5. Your teen is irritable, anxious and gets angry easily on days when he gets less sleep.
6. Your teen is constantly on the run from one activity to the next, cutting in on sleep time.
7. Your teen takes naps lasting 45 minutes or longer and sleeps in for two hours or more on weekends.

How parents can help:

1. Setting a consistent bed-time and wake-time for your teen, even on weekends, that allows for at least 8.5 – 9.25 hours of sleep each night.
2. Encouraging your teen to establish a relaxing bedtime routine that includes reading for pleasure, taking a warm bath or listening to peaceful music.
3. Creating a cool, quiet and dark bedroom for your teen.
4. Keeping the television, computer and cell phone out of the bedroom.
5. Encouraging your teen not to drink caffeinated beverages after lunchtime.
6. Creating an environment that allows your teen to get bright light in the morning and avoid it in the evening.
7. Being a good role model by talking to your teen about the importance of a good night's sleep and making it a priority in your life.

New Vaccine Approved for Human Papilloma Virus

The Food and Drug Administration recently approved the use of Gardasil, a vaccine that helps protect against diseases caused by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). In 2005 the Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 20 million people in the United States had some form of the virus. There are many variants of the virus, some of which are harmless but others cause genital warts, pre-cancerous lesions or cervical cancer. Anyone of any age who takes part in sexual activity that involves genital contact is at risk for catching HPV. Since the infection may not manifest with any sign or symptoms, they can pass on the virus to others without knowing it.

Gardasil protects against the four types of HPV that cause approximately 70% of cervical cancers and 90% of genital warts, and it is most effective before the patient has any contact with the forms of the virus contained in the vaccine. The recommendation is that girls and women ages 9 through 26 years old should receive the vaccine, which is given as an injection in three doses a few months apart. Parents should discuss the vaccine with their daughter's health care provider to determine whether it is right for their daughter and at what age she should receive it. For more information, visit www.gardasil.com.

What's Seen on the Social Scene

by Dr. Mel Levine, Co-Founder and Co-Chair, All Kinds of Minds

WHILE LEARNING REPRESENTS a major challenge for all kids, it does not compare to the social aspects of school in terms of its potential to create unhappiness and maladjustment among students.

From early in the morning until well into the evening, kids labor under relentless pressure to gain the approval of their peers, to sidestep public embarrassment, and to form protective and supportive friendships. For some, the social campaign yields devastating, even tragic results; they are crushed by their personal inability to build a positive reputation with their classmates. Often these kids have social cognitive dysfunctions. They simply lack the brain wiring needed for social success.

We can divide social cognitive functions and dysfunctions into three general areas: verbal social ability, non-verbal social ability, and political skill. Let's take a look at how each of these skills affects children's success in the classrooms, corridors and playgrounds of our schools.

Verbal Social Ability

Kids need to talk appropriately with other kids. Socially successful students usually have good conversational skills. They pick their topics well and are able to regulate their tone of voice, choice of words, and sentence structure to resonate with prevailing moods. They know how to talk kid language credibly, and they are adept at using language that makes others like them and also, feel good themselves.

Children with social language dysfunctions may talk about the wrong things at the wrong time. They may sound angry when they're not angry. They may have trouble "reading" other people's feelings from the way they speak or sound. Socially rejected students are often boastful or verbally abrasive. When they try to converse

with peers, their choice of language may make them sound too old or too young. In essence, they may be totally ineffective at using language as an instrument for social success.

Non-verbal Social Ability

The non-verbal aspects of socialization are just as relevant as the verbal aspects. Non-verbal social skills include the ability to resolve conflicts without fighting or resorting to verbal abuse. Knowing how to respond to the social behavior of others, for example, being able to interpret other people's facial expressions and body language is just as crucial. Finally, children who are socially adept also know how to "market" themselves, i.e., develop an image that is appealing to others (often reflected by the way they dress, act, move their bodies, etc.). Regrettably, some students seem to be socially clueless when it comes to these nonverbal interpersonal processes. They may have no idea how they are coming across, and why they keep hearing, "Sorry, this seat is saved."

The Political Challenge

Success in school is, at least in part, a political affair. Different kids are more or less successful in pleasing their highly judgmental constituencies. The group that students most need to win over is their teachers. Indeed, children learn political skills by getting their teachers to like and respect them. Once called "apple polishing," this is a practical part of real world education. Relating well to your teachers in school is the precursor to getting your boss to like and reward you as an adult! Sadly, some kids have less than optimal relationships with the important adults in their lives, and seem unable to nurture positive interactions with those that supervise and evaluate them. Naturally, they suffer as a result of these weaknesses. They seem to miss

the point that teachers are human beings, and have a need for students to compliment them, appreciate them as individuals, and also to show an interest in the subject matter they teach.

Some Helpful Hints

Parents and schools should monitor the social successes and failures of children and adolescents. Some kids need practical advice on how to succeed (or at least survive) socially. In severe cases, social skills training may be required, if available. In all instances, parents or caretakers need to serve as social sounding boards, so kids can confide in them about social setbacks endured during the school day. Such adults need to be very good listeners, avoiding the temptation to be overly reassuring (e.g., "don't worry about it, just ignore her"), and the impulse to preach a sermon.

More than anything, kids with social difficulties need adults who can be sympathetic to their situations, and who are able to offer practical advice. Sometimes, for example, a mentor in the community can help advocate for a child with social cognitive dysfunctions. At other times, when a child is being actively bullied by peers, parents may need to intercede with school administrators. Whenever possible, however, adults should provide consultation and advice only; the child should attempt to solve his own interpersonal difficulties. Learning the best ways to function in our social world is a critical skill for all students.

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Parent - Teacher Communication

Our Heartfelt Thanks

Your donations are continuously needed to fund the eight newsletters (four issues of *Parents Together* and four issues of *Primer*) we publish each school year. Our sincere thanks to the contributors listed below.

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Parents Together gratefully acknowledges the contribution from the Greenwich Coalition to Combat Underage Drinking to reprint *Guidelines for Teen Parties*.

During the course of the school year it is possible that you will want, or need to have, a conversation with one or more of your child's teachers. An important element in a child's education is candid communication between teacher and parent; meeting with your child's teacher can, and should, build strong parent-teacher relationships. However, you may be unsure whom to speak to when a question or situation arises regarding your child in school. *Parents Together* offers these tips for effective communication between parents and teachers:

Who?

- ◆ The initial conversation should be with your child's teacher.
- ◆ In middle and high school the Guidance Counselor can be an effective mediator between you and the teacher or between student and teacher. They can be excellent resources for solving difficulties.
- ◆ Avoid involving the principal before discussing the problem with the teacher; it is uncomfortable for the teacher if the principal is contacted prior to the teacher even being aware of a problem.
- ◆ Should you not be satisfied with the teacher's response, make an appointment to discuss the issue with the principal.
- ◆ The chain of command thereafter is the Assistant Superintendent and then the Superintendent of Schools.
- ◆ In middle school your child should be encouraged to talk to the teacher *before* you get involved. However, he must be able to count on you for support.
- ◆ In high school, most of the responsibility to discuss any sort of difficulty with the teacher will be with the teen. He should be take it upon himself to set up an appointment with the teacher. High school teachers try to deal directly with the student; they are less likely to contact parents.

How?

- ◆ Call the school and leave a message for the teacher to get back to you. Include times over the next couple of days when you will be available to talk. Leave appropriate phone numbers for those instances.
- ◆ Other options are sending an email or calling the guidance counselor.
- ◆ It is reasonable to expect your message or e-mail be returned within 48 hours.
- ◆ Remember not to call when you are angry; except in an emergency situation you should wait 24 hours before contacting the teacher. This allows you some time to investigate and process the situation rationally.

Where?

- ◆ Discussions should be held in private where you and the teacher are comfortable and free from distraction. The guidance counselor might provide an office for the meeting.
- ◆ Face-to-face conversations are more effective than telephone or e-mail conversations.

What?

- ◆ The person calling the meeting should direct the discussion.
- ◆ Stick to the present topic and stay in the present time.
- ◆ For the conversation to be successful, parents and teachers need to be open-minded. The way the message is delivered may be more important than the message itself.
- ◆ Beginning the discussion with a question is an effective strategy, as is the use of a non-accusatory tone.
- ◆ End the conversation with a brief recap of what was discussed and what follow-up is to be expected.
- ◆ Thank school personnel when they are doing a good job. Remember, contact should not only take place when there is a concern but also when there is good news.



2006 - 2007 Parents Together Delegates

Parents Together's strength as an organization stems in large part from its two-pronged effort to address broad parenting issues on a town-wide basis, and narrower topics specific to individual school populations. Making sure this happens on a timely and relevant basis are delegates from every public and independent elementary, middle and upper school in Greenwich. Feel free to share with your *Parents Together* delegates the parenting issues that are on your mind so that they can tailor programs to best fit the needs of your school community.

Parents Together thanks the following parents who have generously volunteered to serve as delegates in their schools.

Brunswick School
Jackie Keeshan
Anne Marie Reilly

Central Middle School
Mamie Lee

Convent of the Sacred Heart
Donna Hascher

Cos Cob School
Lisa Edmundson

Eagle Hill School
Karen Cahill

Eastern Middle School
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Parents Together 2006 - 07 Programs

Monday, September 18
Delegate Training

Monday, October 23
"Collaborating to Foster Resilient
Minds," a presentation by Dr.
Angela Chan, Developmental and
Behavioral Pediatrician.

Other program dates are:
Monday, November 13, 2006
Monday, February 12, 2007
Monday, March 5, 2007
Monday, May 14, 2007

*These programs are free and everyone is welcome. Please note that child care is **not** provided. Unless otherwise noted, they are held in the Cone Room, Greenwich Town Hall, from 9:15-11AM. Weather related cancellations are announced on WGCH 1490. Call 637-7719 or 329-2243 for additional information.*

Who We Are

Parents Together is an independent nonprofit organization in Greenwich, CT, that offers ongoing opportunities for parents to communicate, share, support and work together. We work in cooperation with the Parent Teacher Associations of the public, private and parochial schools in town. The *Parents Together* organization and delegates from Greenwich schools plan programs for parents with children in grades K-12. We also publish two newsletters:

Parents Together Primer for parents of children from birth through fifth grade and ***Parents Together***, for parents of adolescents.

Distribution: *Parents Together Primer* is distributed to parents through their children's preschools and elementary schools. *Parents Together* is sent to parents of children in grades 6 through 12 in all Greenwich public and independent schools.

Newsletter Subscriptions and Correspondence: We invite parents and all other readers interested in local parenting issues to subscribe to either or both newsletters. For an **annual subscription**, please indicate which newsletter you wish to receive, and send your name, address and \$10 for each subscription in a check payable to **Parents Together**, to P. O. Box 4843, Greenwich, CT 06831-0417. Correspondence may be mailed to the same address.

Contact Us!

Got a story idea, writer suggestion or comment for the **Parents Together** staff? You may fax it to 698-3376 or email it to Togetherparent@aol.com.

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Parents Together Welcomes New Superintendent of Schools

Parents Together extends a warm welcome to former Connecticut Commissioner of Education Betty Sternberg, who was named as Superintendent of Greenwich Public Schools in June. In accepting the position, she remarked that it was "a dream come true" and she plans to continue the work of her predecessor, Dr. Larry Leverett, in closing the achievement gap.

In her previous role Dr. Sternberg spoke about five ways to close the gap: providing high quality pre-school for every three- and four-year old in the community who needs it; addressing literacy issues of parents whose children need help; ensuring children from lower income families have access to high quality medical care to enhance their ability to learn; establishing a high-quality curriculum that provides teachers with the ability to test how well their students learn the material; and considering a longer school day and a longer school year. No small feat, she plans to tackle the challenge in stages.

Dr. Sternberg has expressed the importance of an open dialogue with parents and communicates regularly via email. At the beginning of the school year Dr. Sternberg will tour all the schools to meet the faculty, staff, students and parents. We look forward to working with her and wish her every success in her new role.

New Legislation Regarding Alcohol and Minors

Minors may not possess alcohol on public or private property after October 1, 2006. The first offense is an infraction and a fine is imposed for subsequent offences. A parent, guardian or spouse over 21 may still serve alcohol to a minor - this law is unchanged. Alcohol use in religious ceremonies is also unchanged. No new police powers are created but having a uniform state law should help enforcement at the local level.

Source: www.housegop.ct.gov/members/powers.asp

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