

Teens: How do you get your parents to hear you, take you seriously and prepare for your future? *How to Raise Respectful Parents* is your guide for how to do both.

Parents: Does your teen tune you out? Do you wonder how to communicate so they more easily tune in? *How to Raise Respectful Parents* is your guide to improved teen communication.

How to Raise Respectful Parents is a teen's guide to navigating adult culture by equipping teens with communication skills. Each chapter introduces a new communication skill by using real world examples and conversations between parents and teens. Teens will feel empowered as they try their new communication skills at home, school and work, laying a foundation for entering adulthood. These skills empower teens while enticing parents to read and practice the relationship building and communication skills outlined in the book. Teens will learn how to grow meaningful, more satisfying relationships with their parents through sample conversations and communication exercises about popular teen subjects including homework, driving, friends, dating, social media and more. Tips are also included for helping teens deal with adult culture.

“Teens, this book tells you what you need to know to manage your parents, yourself, and difficult situations with skills that will serve you well throughout your life.” —*Sharon R. Carter, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, Life and Executive Coach, Pagosa Springs, CO.*

"Laura Reagan has produced an excellent guide to assist teens in developing good relationships with parents. She teaches skills that are not only valuable, but can be mastered with practice. She does not avoid difficult scenarios but provides down-to-earth guidance in navigating such situations." —*Chad Richardson, PhD., University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Edinburg, TX; Author of Batos, Bolillos, Pochos y Pelados.*

"Through homework hassles and communication issues, Reagan's strategies will help teens and parents build better futures together."—*Susan Valverde, National Supplemental Education Expert, Baltimore, MD.*

"YES! The title declares an under-utilized view and approach in the sphere of family interpersonal dynamics. Teens most definitely have a role in guiding their parents' development. I am grateful my parents were open to this when I was growing up. Thank you, Laura, for this amazing reminder of what's possible when you lead with love."—*Bobby Jasso, Singer-Songwriter/Actor, Los Angeles, CA.*

"This book provides hands-on advice and action steps for teens to create positive relationships with their parents. Reagan's insights will help you build the connection you're searching for!"—*Jake Heilbrunn, teen author of Off the Beaten Trail, San Diego, CA*

**HOW TO RAISE RESPECTFUL
PARENTS**
BETTER COMMUNICATION FOR TEEN AND
PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

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Dedication

For Hope and Grace

Acknowledgment

Thank you to the University of Texas Pan American, now the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Sociology Department (UTRGV) where we first discussed service-oriented sociology.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Lyles Reagan, known as the Teen & Parent Relationship Whisperer, is a family sociologist with more than 30 years of experience in practical youth development and parenting coaching. She holds a Masters in Sociology specializing in interactionism and communication dynamics. She is a former instructor in the Sociology of Childhood and Adolescence at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.



Her original research, “Dynamic Duos” about adult mentor and parent impact on youth and teens was featured in the *Journal of Applied Social Science*, 2013.

Her teen and parent coaching service has trained parent educators in school districts and served many parents.

Laura’s youth development career spans service in Mexico City as a youth substance abuse counselor to non-profit management in the Boys & Girls Club Movement. She conducts workshops on hot topics such as teen-parent communication, substance abuse, bullying prevention and teen suicide prevention in English and Spanish. She is a frequent radio guest and can be interviewed in English or Spanish. She has published over 100 articles in regional parenting magazines throughout the United States and Canada. Most importantly Laura is the mother of one teen daughter and one young adult daughter. She lives to recount their adventures. This is her first published book.

Laura’s website: www.lauralreagan.com

Preface

Writing coaches tell their writer apprentices to write the book that they want to read. It is likely that others will want to read it too. That's what I did. I wrote the book I wanted to read when I was a teen. Time and popular culture may change but basic human need hasn't changed. The inevitable struggle between parent and emerging young adult remains.

Like many teens, I felt misunderstood by my parents. I knew they loved me but I was convinced they didn't "get me." When I went to college, I learned about the psychological perspective regarding the parent-child conflict. But it didn't help much, to label my family as dysfunctional. What did help was my study of the sociology of childhood. I learned that children and teens occupy a different social position or place in society than adults do. I also learned that children and teens can exert their own "agency" in interpreting the world and influencing their parents. Most parents will attest to this!

The reality is, parents have most of the power even if they don't think so. Parents earn the money and pay the bills while teens go to school which literally buys them more power, control and influence. Parents are still legally responsible for teens since most of the teen years are spent as minors. Parents naturally have more experience than their children which is why children and teens turn to them as guides. Despite the power structure, teens can have a profound influence on the

relationship they have with their parents. Conscious choice making and effective communication are keys.

This book can serve as a road map to building more positive relationships while honoring your own need for greater independence. The first chapter uses a popular idea of culture or sub-culture to describe the difference in roles between parents and teens. The second chapter introduces the concept of co-creation, where both parents and teens jointly define the parameters of their relationship and how it works. The subsequent companion chapters on *How to Listen So Your Parents Stop Talking* and *How to Talk So Your Parents Will Listen* describe exactly how to improve communication and negotiation skills. There are exercises to try in small or larger doses depending on your situation, along with real-life examples of teen and parent conversations. There is a chapter on difficult family situations such as substance abuse, mental illness and divorce. The final chapter applies the communication skills to the world of work and school, detailing how to use the skills outside your family. This book is a “how to” manual for navigating the adult world and empowering yourself with attitudes and communication skills that will serve you in the adult world you are joining and co-creating.

After trying some of the skills, please visit my website and share how it is working out for you at www.lauralreagan.com.

Author's Note

The approach of co-creation in teen parent communication, Parenting Sociology and Heart 2 Heart Parents does not deny mental illness and the need for treatment if mental illness is diagnosed in a parent, child or teen. The approach of Co-creation Parenting, Parenting Sociology and Heart 2 Heart Parents Parenting simply offers a set of tools for creating satisfying relationships when mental illness has been shown to not be the problem.

The terms, *adult culture* and *youth culture* are used throughout this text as a popular reference to encourage conscious agency as co-creators of the social institution of family. These terms are not being used as social science academic research terms.

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HOW TO RAISE RESPECTFUL PARENTS

Chapter 1 — You Are Not Alone

Do you ever feel like an alien?

Imagine you are an alien from another planet, dropped into a human family for a scientific study of this foreign species called human beings. You notice the adults make most of the decisions for the young so you will focus on them. You will need to understand their biology and be familiar with their physical needs such as food, water and sleep. You will need to develop an understanding of their social and emotional needs. You will need to try to understand the need for their institutions, like families and schools and churches.

You will need to be an anthropologist of sorts. You will have to learn their customs and rituals. You will certainly need to decipher their language and learn to speak it. Undoubtedly, you will notice the power structure of the family you landed in. You will notice that parents set the rules and make most of the decisions for the children. As a social scientist you might question if this process actually trains the young with the skills they will need for the future.

Do you ever feel as if you were an alien dropped down into a human family? Or perhaps the stork that delivers babies got the address wrong? Most of us feel that way sometime during our teen years.

Psychologists will tell you that in some ways, feeling “alien” to your family is a natural part of your development. It allows you to become independent from your family, identify with your friends and begin to make some of life’s choices on your own.

You begin to choose your own value system and take what you want and don’t want, from what your parents, teachers and other mentors have taught you. Your teen years allow you to change what you don’t want from the models you’ve been given and begin to live life differently.

Some sociologists will tell you that you are kept out of society, warehoused in schools and kept from earning money, kept from having a position (job or other status) without a vote about things that affect your life. Of course you feel left out and alienated because you are! But, you are not alone. What you feel is common. It was even common for your parents during their own teen years.

You’re not alone

This book will offer an approach and tools about how to interact with your parents positively even though they may feel foreign to you and you may feel “alien” to them. You can find your own voice and better express yourself using the communication skills outlined. By communicating more effectively with your parents, you will also be learning skills that will help you become a better adult

communicator. These skills will help you take your place in the world as a spouse, parent, employee or employer.

The following are real examples of teens with communication issues. The teens need to communicate what is going on with them but feel inhibited in some way. These teens may not be living your exact reality, but you will likely find something in common with some of them and what they feel about their relationships with their parents. Please read them with an open mind and try to identify with the similarities you share with them and don't focus on the differences.

Good Country Girl - Patti

Patti is a simple country girl. She enjoys gardening and is a member of the 4 -H in her school and community. She raises rabbits for her the local livestock show. She even won second prize in her age group her sophomore year in high school. Patti has an outgoing personality and is well liked by her group friends. She lives with her mom and stepfather in the country outside of the city limits. By day, all is well — but at night when she returns home in the evening on the school bus she lives a different reality.

The thing that causes her the most pain in life is her mother's alcoholism. She gets a knot in the pit of her stomach almost every evening when she steps off the school bus. The walk down the short

driveway to her front door feels like crossing a football field because of the anxiety she feels. She never knows what to expect when she walks in the door. If her mother just started drinking, she was silly and sort of fun. She could still ask questions about Patti's day. If her mom had been drinking since early in the day, there might be an argument about almost any subject. If Patti was lucky, her mom would already be passed out. Her stepdad was no help. Although he was sober as a recovering alcoholic. It seemed that staying sober took everything he had to offer.

If Patti wanted to eat, it fell to her to cook after a full eight-hour day of school and an hour bus ride. Patti was also responsible for cleaning the house and managing the farm which was enough work for a full-time job. There were nights when Patti fell into bed exhausted with no energy to do her homework, wondering, how she was going to keep up with school and life.

Popular Kid — Myra

Myra is one of those drop-dead gorgeous girls. Her teeth are perfect. Her smile lights up a room. Her deep brown eyes dance when she laughs. Even her figure is perfect. She never has a bad hair day and yes, to add to the cliché she is a cheerleader. She knows how to navigate the political power structure in high school and doesn't seem to make waves. She's the person you want to have as your best friend because she is loyal to a fault. To her credit,

she is generally kind to others. She can have any boy in the school and knows it. So, she gets the smart ones to do her homework for her.

She never cracks a book but always makes good grades because she is popular. The teachers call on her but excuse her when she doesn't know the answer. Because she skates along using her good looks to get what she wants and doesn't work hard to merit any real accomplishment, she is secretly, terribly insecure. She thinks no one will like her for who she truly is. Her parents always told her she was beautiful but she wonders why they don't have big dreams for her.

Misfit Jock - Jeff

Jeff is a big lineman on his high school football team. He is a huggable gentle giant with blond hair and green eyes. He does well in school and sings in the choir. He will likely follow in his grandfather's footsteps and join the military because his eyes light up when he talks about the service. He is almost too kind and too good. The girls take advantage of him. He wants to be in the popular crowd but never quite fits in. He seems to have trouble finding that special girl and he wears out his friends talking about the fictitious character.

No one understands why he lacks confidence because they like him. Maybe Jeff is embarrassed about his working-class family and dorky sisters. He doesn't have the clothes or the car that his rich

friends have. He dreams of getting out of his hometown one day and making something of himself. He is tired of feeling used by everyone — even by his mom and dad. He wishes he could tell them how he really feels.

Punk Kid — Kim

Kim is a punk rocker in a town with “0” punk rockers. She identifies with the “be your own person,” rage against the system lyrics. She is tall, thin, beautiful and has soulful deep blue eyes. She has punk cut, blue hair and feels most at home in a mosh pit. Even though her hair and look scream, “pay attention,” she is quite shy. She has an anxiety disorder but rejects medication. She believes she can control it by venting through her music. Music is also an escape from her stepparents. Yes, stepparents. She can’t imagine her parents ever married to each other, but she doesn’t understand why each parent had to pick such losers for partners and give her such wacky stepparents. She is sick of hearing about her clothes from her stepmother and her loud music from her stepfather. What do they know anyway?

She mainly tries to avoid her stepparents and only interact with each parent. She loves them but she wishes she could communicate what she was really feeling. Kim writes poetry. Some of it is dark. Sometimes she leaves her poetry book out on her bed so her mom will find it and read it. She wishes she could share all of who she is with her parents.

She wishes they would give her as much attention as they give their partners.

The Criminal — Sam

Sam grew up poor. He is the middle child of five. He learned early that negative attention was better than no attention. As a boy, he had cute, curly hair but he was embarrassed by it. He was embarrassed and self-conscious about almost everything. But he loved to learn and was always in the library reading. His special interest was mythology. Because he read a lot, he almost always knew the answer when the teacher would ask questions in class discussion. But he was too embarrassed or self-conscious to raise his hand. When he was called on, he purposely answered wrong. He was too cool to play the role of the nerd or smart kid. His intelligence did cause others to look up to him.

He is a charismatic leader and has a great sense of humor. People follow him.

Unfortunately, he was often in trouble at school for being the cut up or for setting others up to take the brunt of the joke. He is a petty thief too but he never gets caught because he anticipates almost every angle and consequence. These skills could have been used on the chessboard but he never wanted that kind of positive attention.

His mother is mentally ill. She beat him as a boy and even as a teen. It causes Sam great shame. He vowed to never strike his mother when she has one of her episodes. Sam feels torn between taking care of his mother and wanting to run away. Sam's sister

is an adult and lives with her own family. Sam's mom and dad divorced when Sam was a boy. It falls to Sam to figure out what to do about his mother. Even as a boy he sensed she wasn't herself. Sam long forgot how to talk about his feelings with anyone because he trusts no one.

The Artist — Joe

Joe is a naturally gifted artist. Like most artists he is moody and quiet. He was a happy little boy but his family doesn't "get" him. His dad wants him to go hunting and fishing with him. He bought Joe a gun for his twelfth birthday. Joe had no idea what to do with it. He went on a deer hunt with his dad but refused to shoot anything. Joe took his sketch pad instead but his dad didn't complement his creativity. He scolded Joe about things like not holding the gun right. His dad certainly didn't take an interest in his drawings. In high school when Joe had an opportunity for a summer internship in a college, his mom thought his summer might be better used to earn money with a summer job.

Joe's parents love him but they just don't understand why he can't be more practical. They don't understand why he can't be more like them. Joe is an introvert anyway but his parents' lack of understanding and appreciation of his gifts make him feel alone. His parents don't have money saved up for his college. Joe has dreams of going to art school or a major university. He wishes he had the words to tell his parents about his dreams.

What do each of these teens want and need?

Each teen wants to be their own person while maintaining a positive connection with their families. Some even want to make a positive difference in the world using their gifts and talents.

Youth development specialists from the Boys & Girls Club of America as well as other youth serving organizations and professionals such as psychologists and sociologists have determined that healthy youth development includes the following components.

- **A sense of belonging**

The first place we “fit” and are accepted is with our families. In our teen years, we can gain a sense of belonging from our peer group, school or church group.

- **A sense of power and influence**

All children need to be heard with the opportunity to influence the decisions and actions of others. This begins in the family and then extends to other groups.

- **A sense of usefulness**

- This is the feeling that youth have of contributing to others, providing a valued service or occupying an important role.

- **A sense of competence**

All youth need to explore their gifts and talents and feel that there is something they can do well.

We achieve these important developments by effectively communicating who we are.

Teens face numerous crises given the overwhelming high school dropout rates, child and adolescent obesity rates, substance abuse, bullying, teenage pregnancy rates and juvenile crime rates rising. A multitude of studies show that teens still view their parents as their primary role models.

The following chapters and exercises will help you improve your relationship with your parents. You will learn how to listen so they don't lecture you and you will learn to talk in a way that will make them take notice. As a result, your relationship will be less conflictual and you may even learn to enjoy your parents more! These same communication skills will help you with your friends, your teachers and eventually your employers as you grow and change.

The purpose of parenting is to help kids and teens gain the skills and resources they need to be successful adults. The purpose of your teen years is to grow your skills over time to become a successful adult as you define success. Parents and teens have complementary, not competing roles in the endeavor to grow, even though sometimes all you feel is conflict.

By empowering yourself as a growing teen with effective communication skills, you can fully participate in creating a complementary, satisfying relationship with your parents that fulfills its purpose of preparing you for the future!

This book will help you build the skills and the relationship you need.

Chapter 2 - From *They* to *We*:

Co-creating a Positive Relationship with Your Parents

Let's go back to the idea of being an alien anthropologist from another planet sent to study, understand, negotiate and begin peaceful productive relations with the new sub-culture of human beings called adults. What are the tools you would need to operate in their world?

As ridiculous as it seems, it may serve you to think about relating to your parents as if you don't know them. Let's face it! The adult world and by default your parents, can be confusing, overwhelming, illogical and chaotic. Social science tools might help create some order from the chaos.

Here are a few of the tools you might need to investigate your new surroundings and learn the culture of adults and their language.

- **Non-judgmental Attitude**

This is their culture. In order to learn it, we must assume that they do things the way they do for a reason. We might not agree or like that reason but it is uniquely theirs. If we try to understand it and not judge it, we may learn how to relate to adults better.

Viewing your parents non-judgmentally will actually serve to empower you to consider how you chose to relate to them rather than feeling victim to the way things have always been.

If your parents have a 10:00pm. bedtime, rather than seeing them as lame for going to bed early, consider that they work in a job they may hate in order to pay the bills.

If your parents cook at home most of the time, rather than go out to eat, consider not only the expense but also the fact that they may want to eat healthier and can accomplish their weight loss goals more easily by eating at home.

- **Be Curious — Be a Student of Adult Culture**

Ask why things work the way they do?

Dad, why do you think it's important to have a curfew? (At this point, don't argue with the answer, just grow in your understanding of why parents believe what they believe.)

Mom, why do you think college is important? Sometimes, I really want to be able to make weekend plans. I know family time is important but why is it so important to you that Sunday dinners can't be missed?

- **Use the scientific method for your social learning and social experiment. Form a hypothesis. Gather evidence.**

Every parent wants their child to do better than they have. If your parents are insistent on sending you to college, ask how many other family members have gone to college. Perhaps no one has and you will be the first. They may be investing their hopes of a college future on you in terms of improving the family. They may not have been able to put it into words as to why it is so important to them that you go to college.

- **Validate your Hypothesis or Findings by using multiple sources**

Ask your friends about their parents. Do they have similar rules as your parents? Do they use their weekends the same way your parents do?

Parent Culture

Parents want their children to have a better life than they did. They want you to be happier, be able to take care of yourself, have a better job than they have, have a better marriage than they have (no offense to mom and dad) and they want you to be a better parent than they are. Honestly, it's true! Even the worst parent in the penitentiary wants their child to have a better life of freedom than they do.

The trouble is, sometimes parents don't recognize that you are your own person now. Once they did everything for you. Once upon a time, you were completely dependent upon them. Now, you have

your own likes and dislikes. You have your own desires about the future. You no longer need them in the same ways you did. Sometimes, it's hard for parents to relinquish responsibility of you and the control that goes with it, even if they know that they should.

Lessons Learned from Being a Social Scientist of Parental Adult Culture

1. Adults respect order.

The clearer you can be in how you present yourself and your ideas, the more readily adults were hear, understand and respect you.

Hint: Plan your talk about sensitive subjects. Write down an outline and stick to the script you prepare.

2. Adults like kids who sound like them.

We tend to have a bias towards people like us. We like others who look and sound like we do. Without diversity training, bosses tend to hire employees who are similar to them. As human beings, parents are the same way.

Hint: Listen to the language your parents use. Pay attention to their vocabulary. When you want to communicate about an emotionally charged subject, copy their phrases.

3. Adults need reassurance.

It is a biological instinct for parents to protect their young. It is literally hard wired into their DNA. As a result, parents have fear about their children's safety and well-being. The more a teen can be sensitive to and prepare for this legitimate biological and psychological need the better communication will be.

Hint: Parents will be impressed if you tell them before you ask how you intend to pay for an item or who will chaperone the party you want to attend or that you know to locate the police officers at a concert when you walk in. They will be comforted by the fact that you have thought ahead for emergency situations and are taking safety into account.

Learning about parent culture and translating your ideas to adult-speak will help you practice communication skills that will help you be successful in college, find employment and develop professionally.

Teen Culture

Social scientists have observed that children create meaning from the world around them and work together to create their own interpretations of even complicated issues like racism and gender roles. But adults often miss out on kid culture and its creative force because they are too busy imparting adult culture. Or adults are too busy with their own lives. Ever heard of the **generation gap**?

Since cars were invented and teens asked for the keys on weekends and had a separate time away from parents, **teens have been creating their own culture.** Rock and roll was born as a result! Today teens create their own language, meanings and of course music. Teen culture and various subcultures are dynamic and ever changing. It flies at the speed of the internet through social media.

In other parts of the world, the generations are not so divided. While the amount of time spent with each other daily is greater in tribal cultures when compared to our own Western culture, are we doomed to be disengaged as parents and teens?

No! We have choices. One powerful choice is to co-create the relationship you want with your parents.

Co-creation 101

Co-creating is a sociological and even a business term about relationships. It suggests that each party in a relationship shares the ability or power to influence the relationship. Traditional sociology views the role of children and teens as passive recipients of social learning where the institutions of society such as family, school and church teach children about our culture's beliefs and behaviors.

As any new parent knows, children can definitely define the relationship by expressing their needs. Babies cry. Parents feed them, pick them up or change diapers. That influence continues throughout the child's life as they learn and grow to full maturity.

In the new sociology of childhood, children are co-creators of culture and relationships. Their role is obviously different than that of adults but their influence as what sociologists call “social actors” is powerful. (Prout & James 2010).

What if teens claimed their rightful power as co-creators and consciously chose to influence their relationship with their parents? What if through simple, honest communication and a little education and experimentation, teens could positively influence their parents and by so doing, practice the skills they will need for adulthood?

Co-Creation: You Can Help Create a Better Relationship with Your Parents

Co-creation is a conscious effort between teens and parents to be fully involved in jointly defining the relationship.

Unconscious Co-creation

Co-creation happens all the time unconsciously. We teach people how to treat us based on our own behavior. When your dad comes in tired and stressed from a full day at work, you probably know it's not a good time to ask for money.

Co-creation also occurs when your mom or dad decides it's not worth the battle to remind you for the third time to take out the trash and they do it themselves.

Or they read your response in your eyes about the choice of family vacation when you were planning

something else so they get mad at you before you before you even say anything.

To use the power of co-creation consciously simply means to build a more positive relationship with your parents by the way you choose to communicate with them. If you take a pro-active role with them, they may begin to see you as the growing, developing mature teen you are becoming.

a.) Their Job

A parent's job in the teen years is to prepare their teen for the future. This is an impossible task because they have no idea what the future will look like. They don't know what the economy will be like. Will we all be looking for oil? Or will there be water wars? Will teens need to have survival skills as the doomsday movies predict? Parents don't know what the culture will be like.

How will global warming affect our fashion, lifestyle and career choices? Will everyone keep a garden at home? Will art be viewed in person or will we have access to it online? Will we all speak English or is it necessary for teens to know Spanish, since Latinos are the fast growing segment of the U.S. population? No parent can predict the future.

Myths

- i. Parents know everything.**

They don't.

ii. My parents don't love me, care about me or get me.

Yes, they do. It's healthy self-interest for them to love you. All parents have a biological if not spiritual imperative to see their children better off than they are. Parents don't always have the tools to show you how much they love you.

iii. My parents are the worst.

They aren't. You can always find someone with worse parents than you have.

b.) Your Job

A teen's job is to grow to be a healthy adult physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, learning enough about the world to become self-sufficient in time. To do this requires increasing independence from parents while identifying with friends (usually other teens close to your age) and mentors (teachers, older siblings and young adults that are already making it on their own). Choosing the right friends, mentors and resources is critical to help you develop into the kind of adult you want to be.

Growing away from parents and towards your adult self requires building positive trusting relationships with others. These friends and mentors become the bridge to your adult self. It's a paradox.

By becoming independent from your parents you become more reliant on others who will help you become an adult. Your job as a teen is about finding the people and resources you need to become a healthy responsible adult.

Myths

i. Everyone thinks they know where they are going and how to get

They don't! They are just as scared, insecure and nervous as you feel.

ii. Everyone thinks they know what's best for you.

They don't! There has never been a "you" in the history of the universe. You are wonderfully unique. Even if you are a twin, despite shared DNA, how you process the world is still unique.

iii. No one has ever had it as bad as I do or feels as bad I do. *

As unique as you are, what you feel isn't. It's a paradox. What about Anne Frank, spending her adolescence in a closet by day and a small room by night in a war-torn country only to be captured and killed in the end? What about teens growing up with famine in Africa lucky enough to make it to a refugee camp? You may feel bad, but feelings are

not facts when compared to reality in most of our cases.

***Nevertheless, there are some things that are unacceptable.** Physical, verbal or sexual abuse is never okay. Abuse of any kind is too much for any teen or family to deal with alone. Get professional help. See Chapter 7 for some resources for how to seek help.

An Example of Co-creation

My youngest daughter loves horses. She has been riding since she was four years old. In her mid-teens, she discovered an approach of interacting with horses popularized by Monty Roberts, who is considered one of the first horse whisperers. He was made famous by the book, *Shy Boy* which is the story of a wild mustang that communicated with Monty and followed him home. Mr. Roberts attributes this to the language of *equis*. It is the non-verbal communication horses use to communicate with each other.

By observing the non-verbal communication of horses, Mr. Roberts learned it over time and applied it to communicate with horses in their “language.” By learning horses’ language and behaviors, a human can interact with a horse in a way that invites partnership instead of submission to control and domination. Parent and teen cultural communication is like that! When parents and teens understand the motivations of each and communicate in a way that is understood by both, positive things can happen.

By tuning into one another, meeting the horse with its own language (non-verbal communication and behaviors) a human can literally co-create a relationship with another species. Ask any teen or tween if their parents are alien to them and at some point during their adolescence they will likely agree. Because of focusing on the non-verbal part of communication, we can learn something about the importance of actively, co-creating a relationship from the example of the horse whisperer that can be applied to the parent-teen relationship.

Relationship Building

Teens and specialists through research have identified ways to tune into each other and influence each other's lives from the perspective of parent and teen.

I served as Executive Director of a youth development non-profit for seven years. We ran mentoring programs and youth development curriculum with specific targeted outcomes. We wanted to help our youth members grow to be healthy and successful, meaning we helped them graduate high school, develop without substance abuse, avoid childhood obesity and prevent teenage pregnancy.

We achieved these results by providing a meaningful relationship with a caring adult. When we evaluated these programs we saw trends in what kids perceived as the important factors for how adults impact them. Invariably, the first adults they

spoke of were their parents. This was even true for our teen focus group and survey results.

Teens admire their parents for 1) doing fun activities with them, 2) teaching them a skill, 3) protecting them, 4) help them solve problems and 5) are present in times of crisis.

The following descriptions and sample responses are the ways teens identified as important for how they were influenced by parents and mentors.

Fun activities — include but not limited to: games, sports, movies and shared events including family outings.

Mom took me shopping last weekend!

Dad played video games with me almost every night this summer.

Every Tuesday is family board game night. At first I thought it was lame but when my parents let us eat junk food while we do it, it's not so bad. It's sort a cool!" My dad won't let me win though. He so competitive. Mom always lets us win.

My mom and I go to the dollar movies and watch the romantic comedies since dad hates them. She laughs really loud. It's embarrassing but also cool to see her let her hair down.

Teaching skills refers to homework help, coaching of a sport, guitar lessons, dance lessons, computer skills and much more.

Mom taught me to Zumba. I taught her cooler dance steps.

Dad was the first one to teach me football. We used to play in the backyard.

Dad is a math whiz. He helps me with algebra. I still don't get it but at least he tries to help.

My grandmother taught me to sew one summer. I thought it would be boring but now I really like it. It's relaxing.

Caretaking and protection refers to protection from bullying and providing for needs such as meals, clothes and healthcare when ill.

My parents buy me new school clothes and supplies every year. It makes me feel good.

My mom has two jobs. But every weekend, we get a pizza or something like that. When we get back she cooks most of the afternoon. She freezes the meals for us and we heat them up when we get home from school. She works really hard for us. She wants me to study hard and get one good job that pays enough for everything. I want to get a job that pays me a lot so she can retire. My mom really loves us.

Every day I walked home from school. There was a group of guys that used to bully me. One day I got up the courage to tell my dad. He told me to walk home another way. I did but the bullies followed me. My dad drove up right behind them and honked. They ran away but my dad caught one and told them if they didn't stop he was going to report them. I didn't have any trouble after that. I think my dad saved my life!

Problem solving responses included but are not limited to hard homework, help with bullying, trouble with a boyfriend /girlfriend or teacher, a parent's divorce or substance abuse.

My dad looked everywhere when my puppy ran away. We drove around, calling and calling her. We looked for hours. He thought he heard her barking. He walked through muddy ditches until he finally found her. She was all wet and smelled terrible. I wrapped her in a towel and dried her off. She was crying so much that I started crying. I think my dad cried too. My dad showed me he really cared.

I don't understand algebra. I don't understand why we have to take it. We won't use it later in life.

My mom said she had trouble in math in high school also. She knew I was studying but I wasn't getting it. She couldn't help me. But she hired a tutor even though she really couldn't afford it. It made a big difference.

Sara's boyfriend grabbed her arm and twisted it when he thought she was talking to another guy and stepping out on him. I told Sara that wasn't right and she shouldn't take abusive behavior from anyone. I was really worried about Sara but I didn't want to be a snitch. When Sara came over to my house, my mom saw the mark and asked about it. Sara said it was an accident but Mom asked me about it later. I was glad she saw because she is going to talk to Sara's parents or the counselor or something.

Presence in crisis examples include but are not limited to: loss of a pet, feelings of social isolation, school failure, boyfriend/girlfriend break ups, family distress over economics, alcoholism, drug abuse or divorce.

When my dad called my teacher about re-testing after I failed. I felt like he really cared.

When my grandmother died, my mom was really upset. My stepfather helped her out and helped her make decisions. It was like he took over. I felt left out but my dad came to the funeral and sat by me even though he and my stepfather don't really get along.

Chris broke up with me over the weekend. I cried and cried all day Saturday. By Sunday, my mom said, it was time to deal with it and move on. At first I thought she was being mean, then she showed me the ice cream and DVDs she bought. We spent the whole day on the couch together, eating junk food and watching old movies. Even though we didn't really talk about Chris much, I knew she understood. I felt a little better by the time I went back to school on Monday."

My research was featured in the *Journal of Applied Social Science* (JASS, 2013) and shows what these teens believe to be impactful for them about how parents and other caring adults can influence them. These areas of fun activities, teaching a skill, protection and caretaking, problem solving and presence in crisis, can be used to build more positive relationships with your parents.

Take a few minutes to think about whether or not you identify with these teens. Do you feel more connected to your parents if you do fun activities together? Are you more willing to listen to them if they help you with a problem? Do you feel closer to them if they are there for you in a crisis moment? Take a few moments to consider the things you can do to build a more positive relationship with your parents by “tuning into them” as people. Exercise A may help you.

Exercise A — Relationship Building

Fill out this simple questionnaire and follow the suggestions to co-create a better relationship with your parents, starting today.

1.) What fun activities can you share?

Name at least three. Then ask your parent(s) to do one of these things this weekend with you.

Don't ask for anything else when you are asking them to make time for fun with you.

- a.) _____
- b.) _____
- c.) _____

2.) Think of three skills your parent(s) taught you. Write them down no matter how small they seem. Then thank your parent for teaching you that. (Yes, it may seem corny or

hokey but trust me, it will make your parents day and help build a more positive relationship.)

- a.) _____
- b.) _____
- c.) _____

3.) Think of three things your parent(s) has done to protect you or take care of you. Write them below and then look for an opportunity. You may even consider writing a thank you note or putting a personal hand written note inside a holiday card like Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day or their birthday.

- a.) _____
- b.) _____
- c.) _____

4.) Write down three problems your parent(s) helped you solve. The next meal you have together, tell them the following. *I was thinking about the time you helped me solve that problem (name the problem). Thanks for helping me with that.*

- a.) _____
- b.) _____
- c.) _____

4.) Were your parents ever there for you when you were in crisis? Name the crisis and

try to be there for them the next time you see them super stressed.

- a.) _____
- b.) _____
- c.) _____

Co-creation Means Re-Negotiation

When teens and parents re -negotiate the power structure of their relationship in a way that honors the importance of both of their roles and share responsibility for a positive relationship, they both feel better, enjoy each other and prepare for the future. Relating to each other becomes less about one correcting the other or one blaming the other and more about uniting together to solve problems. The “you” and “me” becomes “we.”

A parent has to balance two responsibilities, 1) keep you safe so you can grow up healthy and 2) give you the resources and support you need to explore and find your place in the world so that you become a caring, responsible, contributing member of society. Balancing those two objectives is a monumental task and NO ONE gets it right all the time.

As a teen, you MUST 1) push against the boundaries that parents and other authority figures set for your safety so that YOU can discover for yourself what is safe for you. And 2) you MUST explore the world, find your own resources (some of which your parents have given you) and make them your own for your life’s journey.

Your parents' roles and responsibilities and your roles and responsibilities may seem to be directly against each other but they exist for a reason. They want to be. The different roles and responsibilities of parents to teens, actually provide you with the testing ground to experiment with who you want to become. That means the conflicts you have with your parents and other adults actually help you define who you are. Over time, you get to choose what you want to keep about what they have taught you and what you want to discard. The perceived conflicts, help you set the stage to be able to advocate and negotiate for your needs and wants. Communicating and advocating for your needs and wants are skills you will need as an adult in all your personal and professional relationships.

Rather than resenting your parents for doing their job, why not see their position as the very thing that can help you grow to adulthood. The co-creation attitudes and communication skills can help you do the work of growing into the adult you want, by practicing with your parents. The co-creation approach begins by defining who in the relationship has specific issues and builds to learn ways to listen and speak so your parents will stop their talking and hear you.

