Therapeutic Conversations with Adolescents

Helping Teens in Therapy Thrive in an Ultra-Competitive, Screen-Saturated World

JANET SASSON EDGETTE

ROUTLEDGE

"In her newest book, Janet Edgette encourages us to be brave enough to violate some of the most hoary and archaic rules of psychotherapy. She reminds us that therapy is rooted in our capacity to think deeply and compassionately and that it's not just about what to *do* with our adolescent patients—it's about how to *be* with them."

Brad E. Sachs, PhD*, psychologist and author of* The Good Enough Teen, The Good Enough Therapist*, and* When No One Understands

"Janet Sasson Edgette has yet again proved to us that she has her fingers on the pulse of what it's like to be an adolescent today. This book illustrates the range of issues that kids face from the inside out and the range of responses that therapists can utilize to engage this population. I couldn't put this book down! Janet's insight, perception and authenticity are so refreshing!"

Amy Fantalis, MS, MSW, LCSW*, psychotherapist*

"*Therapeutic Conversations with Adolescents* is an unprecedented and extraordinary guide for therapists treating teens and families. It's an elite handbook that demonstrates what to DO in session. Therapists will learn how to respond in real time and sequence interventions, to name a few of the tools taught throughout the book. This is an invaluable resource."

Joseph Dowling, MS, LPC*, author of* ZONEfulness: The Ultimate Guide for Student-Athletes

"Edgette's honesty and her professional experiences will keep you reading more and then more. She's not lecturing. She's sharing. She's reminding us that we can engage with teens without the pings, rings, dings and all things tech and instead choose face-to-face conversations with truths and vulnerabilities."

Kat Rowan, MA, NCC*, CEO and creative director of TiffinTalk and owner of Rowan Therapy*

Therapeutic Conversations with Adolescents

Therapeutic Conversations with Adolescents takes readers into the office of a seasoned therapist, where they can be a fly on the wall of live therapy sessions. Full of actual dialogue and the processing behind the choice of responses and interventions, this book stands in contrast to the dozens of books about adolescent therapy that discuss mainly theory, conjecture, and generic strategies.

Teenagers today need therapists who can offer robust and unpretentious therapeutic relationships, as well as conversations that matter enough to hold their clients' attention and make them want to come back for more.

Readers will come away from this book understanding how to tread the delicate balance between the support and confrontation, the forthrightness and discretion, and the humor and tenacity that therapists need to make a real and lasting impact with teenagers.

Janet Sasson Edgette, PsyD, therapist, author, and speaker, has worked with teenagers and their parents for over thirty years in her Philadelphia-based private practice.

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To my three boys — Casey, Jake, and Austin –
in whose company I will always rejoice.

Contents

About This Book

Twenty years ago I wrote my first book about doing therapy with teenagers. Entitled, *Adolescent Therapy That Works: Helping Kids Who Never Asked for Help in the First Place*,[1] this book was my first effort at presenting the ideas and practices I'd developed over the decade prior working with adolescents in both residential placement and my private practice.

The book had been prompted in part by the countless case reports I'd heard and read about of teenagers sitting listlessly in front of their therapists, denying the problems for which they had been referred, and frequently mocking the well-intentioned efforts of clinicians and the mental health profession at large. "Resistance" became the universal descriptor for these teens, often obscuring the earnest intentions of many of them to get help.

Believing we could do better, I set about to discover how I could have more constructive and rewarding experiences with my own teen clients. As a result, I developed a different approach to working with adolescents in therapy, one that averted the power struggles and going-nowhere dialogues that derailed so many of the relationships between therapists and teenagers and their respective therapies and led to better outcomes and better experiences for both parties.

Ten years later, I wrote an article in *Psychotherapy Networker* magazine entitled "Why Teens Hate Therapy: Mistakes Therapists Should Avoid."[2] Out of the dozens of articles I've written, this one has been my most popular one to date. It tells us something about our collective desire to better understand what goes wrong when we try to help adolescents through our craft.

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1 W.W. Norton & Company. NY, 2002.
2 Sept/Oct 2012.

A lot has changed since the publication of *Adolescent Therapy That Works* and "Why Teens Hate Therapy," including my own self. It was time for an update.

Therapeutic Conversations with Adolescents stands on the same principles upon which my earlier works were shaped – therapist credibility, an enduring respect for clients' autonomy, and the role of accountability in successful clinical work – and uses them to advance a more comprehensive, intricate and nuanced approach that is more attractive, applicable, and useful to the historically underserved population of adolescents and their parents.

Teenagers who are brought into treatment usually have enough people telling them what they should be doing differently. What they don't have are opportunities to reveal the things they really think and worry about where it's understood that talking about problems doesn't mean you're necessarily ready to take action on them. You can't resolve problems without being able to talk about them broadly, and teens need places where they trust us to hold a space where they can do that without us jumping in immediately to solve for x. That's how you get the kind of animated dialogue that engages them and brings their full selves into the room.

In conversational spaces that are prescription-free – that is, where we're not telling teen clients to stop it, change it, apologize for it, or analyze it, they are freer to think about what they genuinely want to stand by and how they want to show up in their lives. In that kind of holding space, they're much better able to hear us, and don't need to push back so hard when we begin to share our candid thoughts, impressions, and even our frank suggestions. It's in this way that teenagers who balk at all the "good advice" they get from well-meaning parents, teachers, mentors, and counselors start taking ownership of their choices and making the changes necessary for their mental health and quality of life.

Some of the best work I did as a therapist took place at a summer camp where I worked for six years as a psychologist/consultant. I love this camp, and have for half a century, having grown up there almost every summer from the time I was three years old until my mid-teens. On board decades later to help kids and staff with their transition to a seven-week overnight camp and adjustment to living in cabins with six or so other kids or your co-counselor, I had to learn how to transpose the craft of therapy from a 45-minute session in a suburban office to the intimate but casual and open-aired setting of a summer camp. For me, this distilled down into two things: credibility and practicality. Relying on only my own person and no outer trappings, I needed to establish myself as credible, as somebody in whom one's attention and faith were well-placed. And whatever I offered needed to be unobtrusive, graspable, fast-acting, and able to fit seamlessly within the rhythms of camp life.

Every year, and just like the campers, in that climate of leisure, whimsy, vigorous activity, and boundless affection I too became a bigger human being – more generous, more patient, more present. I came to recognize the value and

sheer power of connecting with kids in a thoroughly unadorned, uncontrived way and want to believe that I brought a lot of that back home with me. What was helpful for those kids and counselors were the multiple small moments of grace, of connecting, of sharing or responding, of becoming comfortable letting oneself be known by another person. It was therapy on the go, and it was beautiful.

It's easy for me to romanticize my experience at camp, but there are real takeaways too. I think the biggest one was seeing that we've let some of the principles and processes of therapy become too sacrosanct. Inviolable, hallowed tenets keep us wedded to older models of therapy and older ways of relating to our young clients and their parents that don't really suit today's kids, today's larger communal needs, or even today's therapists, many of whom are looking for more effective, more authentic ways to work with children and teenagers. Those ways do exist, and I hope you'll find some of them in this book and add to them others you discover elsewhere. I'll never believe that it's from our prescriptions or directives that people find what they need in order to live their better lives. I think our strongest influence is sourced from a far more organic and compelling offering: our person, our perspective and wisdom, our advice and warmth, and our patience and respect, among many other things, including, and perhaps especially, our demonstrations of our own human fallibility.

With deep respect for, and appreciation of, your kind attention.

JSE
January 29, 2023
Exton, PA

Acknowledgements

My clients, younger and older, and everyone in between, and the people who are doing their best to care for them – their parents and guardians and grandparents and godparents and aunts and uncles and other caregivers. I thank you for opening your hearts and minds in my presence and allowing me the opportunity to be part of your healing. And to those for whom that didn't happen, I do hope that you have found the solace and strength you needed elsewhere, with others better equipped than me to bring your best forward.

My own beautiful family: my three sons, my best fans, always gracious and kind, funny and considerate, who every day reaffirm my deeply held belief that for parents and their children, the generation gap is more apparent than real.

And Bill K. of course. The driving. The grilling. More important, your devotion and affection and unbounded love. Your generous words of support and your warm, infectious humor. Lucky girl am I.

My wonderful friends, who've been traveling a long time with me, and whom I adore. Thank you, each and every one – the ones I see often, the ones I see too infrequently. I love you all very much.

Oh, my darling pit bull, Libby, as brilliant and lovely and gracious a cotherapist as one could ever want. Rest in peace, my sweet girl. You should know that you were a huge part of why clients kept returning, of why they got better.

Anna Moore, my publisher at Routledge, for your confidence in this book when it was still embryonic.

My professors and clinical supervisors at Hahnemann (now Widener) University in Philadelphia. Never had I loved learning as much as I did for those five years. You were wonderful teachers of both the art and science of

psychotherapy. And such a wealth of knowledge you shared, rich and nuanced, a profound gift. Thank you all.

Rich Simon, may he rest peacefully, who for years would invite me to write something for his magazine, only to ask me a seemingly never-ending stream of questions while I wrote and re-wrote and re-wrote some more. We all joke about having been "Simon-ized," but I'll be the first to say that it made me a better writer, a better therapist, and a better human being. Thank you, Rich.

Jane Friedman, who assured me I'd publish again.

Brad Sachs, Kat Rowan, and Sheri Gardner, who so kindly took the time to review the original proposal and offer their insights on what would become this book – thank you.

And finally, with profound respect and love, my sister, Carol Sasson, my best friend, without whom … well, I don't even know. I just love you, C. And of course, her blue-eyed Connemara, Ronan, as well – kind and hardy and patient, for decades waiting his turn to have his picture in a *real* book. Alas, the timing was off for this one; with it going to press in January, Ronan worried he was just too woolly for his long-awaited glamour shot. But I got you, Ronan. After all, you deserve a book of your own for what you've given those little kids you carry around on your strong back, leaving them with a confidence and jubilation they didn't know they had in them. Here you go, my man.

All names and identifying details in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of clients. The majority of therapy conversations included were re-created verbatim from notes written right after a session, while others are re-created from memory but true to the spirit of the encounter. A few conversations

are hypothetical, in other words, they are conversations or exchanges that I would try to have under the circumstances discussed. Those are identifiable by comments such as, *Here you could say …* or *I could imagine saying ….*

Please know that everything is so disguised that any client's resemblance to a real, living person is pure coincidence.

CHAPTER ONE

Growing Up in a Culture of Social Media, Disconnection, and Unrelenting Pressure

Adolescent Mental Health in the 2020s

Never has the adage, "I was a teenager once too, you know," been more tone deaf to the experience of being a teenager today. So much has changed in the past decade plus, and it's changed in ways that have altered the DNA of how kids communicate with one another, stay connected or don't, relate with family members, acquire information about the world, and plan for their futures, among many other things.

Many of the changes are welcomed, long past due. The embracing of mental health care among youth, and the national dialogue about it that they have brought forward is unprecedented and noteworthy. Kids have both the language and the courage now to talk about how they feel, and to reach out for help when they are overwhelmed or frightened for their own safety. Also welcomed is the uptick in the availability of mental health services, even if it's still not enough.

But some changes are not so welcomed. The explosive growth of social media and its ubiquitous presence in our kids' lives is devastatingly consequential. It's robbed our children and teenagers of so much of their curiosity and creativity and imagination. Boredom has become unendurable, as has the silence that fills bedrooms at night when not bombarded by the cacophony of YouTube and TikTok. The pervasiveness and popularity of social media has also provided fertile soil for a peer culture in which harsh criticism and judgment reign. Kids' appetites for off-the-grid hobbies or interests wilt in the anxiety that engaging in such would mark them as losers, middle school girls especially. Boys who grow up on a near constant diet of video gaming leave home at eighteen

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without having ever developed the social and emotional skills to successfully, let alone confidently, navigate the tasks of independent living, the temptations of the all-you-can-eat buffet of alcohol and drugs they'll find at college, or the challenges of creating relationships with others that they crave but have no idea how to sustain.

What troubles me the most though is probably what troubles teens and their families themselves the most – the lonely sense of disconnectedness that too many family members feel while in close physical proximity of one another. It's just like what Mary Pipher said in her book, ***The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families*** – "Being thirsty in the rain."[1]

And then there's the weed. So much of it, all the time. Kids getting high before school, during school, after school, when they're with friends, when they're alone. Some are self-medicating for anxiety or depression, or both. Some are bored and don't know how to create a more stimulating world around them. Some are just wanting to escape the stress in their lives for a few hours. But it's everywhere at once and insidiously takes the mental edge from our teenagers. They lose their motivation for activities that involve any kind of emotional or physical effort, even ones they have enjoyed. They become complacent about their lives; they aren't particularly happy but don't care to do anything about it at the moment. They let themselves become spacey and dull in their thinking, in their discernment, in their ability to extract important information from their surroundings and make good meaning of it. Parents know all about this but can't stop it.

The Covid-19 pandemic during 2020 and 2021 made everything worse. Kids now had (seemingly) *only* their phones for connection and entertainment. We learned what months of isolation will lead to in teenagers: increased rates of depression, anxiety, lethargy, apathy, and suicide risk. Education was another casualty; so was a sense of security about our world and the people who run it. Teenagers looked into their future and saw an adulthood that became less and less appealing over time, a morass of unwelcome responsibilities, unrelenting stress, and unremitting conflict. How did that happen? Here's how: they looked at *us* — a generation of parents who argue too much, drink too much, work too much, complain too much and play too little. *Thanks, but no*, they rejoin. *Plus, the climate?* they ask to anyone willing to listen. *Will there be a viable planet left when I'm a parent? Will I even want to have children of my own?*

Meanwhile, in another display of the vast disconnect between adults and the generation they are trying to raise, parents, educators, guidance counselors, and family relatives are ceaselessly (and prematurely) exhorting teenagers to load up on all the things believed to afford them the advantages they'll need to be sure to "get into a good college." C'mon, are there really any bad ones?

Omg. No wonder our kids are struggling.

What Does This Mean for How we Practice Therapy with Our Teenage Clients?

Years ago, I was asked to comment on a case study[2] in which the counselor/author, Howard Honigsfeld, a school social worker in the South Bronx, talked about the value of what he described as the "homelier" values of therapy – things like compassion, patience, and common sense – in other words, those values or skills that are often overshadowed by high tech interventions or complicated methodologies. I loved that, and appreciated the gentle push back on trainings that highlighted acronyms and prescribed techniques and manualized protocols at the expense of warmth and clinical sensibility. Mary Pipher also spoke to the merits of "applying earthy solutions" to our modern dilemmas, adding that mental health needs to transcend technique[3]. Hallelujah.

So maybe that's the place to start, not with manuals or itemized treatment plans or psycho-educational worksheets. Not with interviews about problems or protocols based on diagnoses. Maybe the place to start is with a relationship and a conversation that matters enough to hold a young person's attention and makes them want to come back for more. I tell trepidatious new clients, "Come in and let's start a conversation. If it helps, we'll have another. If not, I'll help you figure out something else you can do." I love the challenge.

We can offer these kids opportunities to join us in robust and unpretentious therapeutic relationships that are characterized, at least from our end, by an emotional intimacy, a candor, a respect for the person of the other, and a cultivation of hope and play and thoughtfulness. Through such relationships we can teach our clients the value of relationship repair and of empathic accountability regarding the impact of their choices and behaviors on those around them. We can demonstrate how apologizing can feel good, explain that being right is a victory in name only, and encourage both the expression and comfortable acceptance of small gestures of care. We can model prudence and patience, as well as a passion for that which moves us. We can push back against all the messaging telling adolescents they need to know what they're going to do for the rest of their lives by the time they graduate high school, robbing them of opportunities to see a bigger and more differentiated world and *self*, and turning post-secondary education (college) into nothing more than dressed up trade schools.[4]

That's how we can offer our young clients antidotes to their loneliness, disillusionment, complacency, and untethering. That's how we can try to instill hope in them that they can have worthwhile and fulfilling adulthoods, and spark the curiosity and resilience they will need to build lives like that, with breadth and color and an appreciation for that which brings us awe. Getting their eyes on that prize can be instrumental in the collateral resolution of so many of the personal problems and issues that compromise the quality of their lives.

Fred Rogers, the beloved creator, show runner, and host of the preschool television series Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, remains a hero of mine for many reasons, one of which was his commitment to talking about those experiences that make us bigger human beings – moments of connection and wonder, an openness to that which we may not yet know or understand. His model of empathy and acceptance and kindness is the perfect antidote to the cynicism and guardedness that's infected large swaths of our citizenry.

Turns out his program wasn't just for children after all.

Notes

1 Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families*, Putnam Adult, 1996.
2 Supporting the overwhelmed child, sometimes it just takes time, Howard Honigsfeld & Janet Sasson Edgette, *Psychotherapy Networker*, March/April 2016.
3 Pipher, Mary. [Keynote address]. Psychotherapy Networker Symposium. Washington, DC.
4 J.S. Edgette, Let's stop stressing out our kids with career choice pressure, Opinion. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 11, 2019.

CHAPTER TWO

A Crisis in Confidence and Credibility Among American Parents

The changes over the past couple of decades have not made it any easier for parents to raise their kids than it has for their kids to grow up. The face of modern adolescence has brought a markedly new set of challenges to parents, one of which is the endeavor to maintain an authority and credibility in what are felt to be the critical and judgmental eyes of their teenagers. Social phenomena such as the broadening informalities between the generations, the idealization and subsequent empowering of youth culture, and teenagers' appropriation of electronics serve to chip away at the self-possession and conviction parents need in order to follow through on their choices regarding the best interests of their adolescent children and make what they know will be unpopular but healthy decisions.

In the wake of all these sociocultural changes and what's been described as a mental health crisis among youth, parents are, as they should be, very worried about their kids. Many have lost their inner compass and are left with a gnawing sense of doubt regarding their judgment and decision-making. *What's normal these days?* they wonder. *What are the new red flags? Will bearing down on getting chores done around the house really make my daughter's depression worse, like she says?* Parents find themselves second guessing decisions about everything from curfews to screen time to how disrespectful is *too* disrespectful, and feeling intimidated by the emotional reactivity of teens. Collectively, and over time, these different challenges to parents have effectively neutralized much of the parental authority in the home, something Jerome Price was already writing about in 1996.[1]

And then there's this, too: Adults who romanticize the adolescent lifestyle sometimes begin to idealize the *presumed adolescent knowledge base*. So, when teenagers start acting as if they know better than the adults about

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what's hot and what's sexy and what the new rules are, these adults believe them. They want to raise kids who are confident and independent but fall prey to their teenager's demands to be in control. It's easy to think, "Well, maybe she's right."

Teenage Angst: Fact or Fiction?

Fifteen-year-old Lauren arrives home after school and isn't even through her front door before her mom, Paula, asks her how her day went.

> "It was pretty good," Lauren replies, looking into the refrigerator, to both find something to eat and avoid her mother's focused gaze.
>
> "Just *pretty* good?"
>
> "No, it was good," Lauren backtracks, trying to settle on just the right combination of words so that her mother will stop with her questions.
>
> "What was good about it?" Paula inquires, restlessly.
>
> Lauren sighs, and closes the refrigerator door.
>
> "Why do you have to sigh like that?" whines Paula. "I can't ask you a question about your day?"

Lauren looks over at her mother, and tries to feel sorry for her. After all, she figures, she's been home alone all day, and is probably eager for some company and conversation. But Lauren, to the contrary, has been around people all day, and just wants to go up to her room. She can't summon up the empathy she knows she should be feeling. Instead, she thinks, *Why can't you just ask me how my day was and leave it at that? And what's the matter with "pretty good" anyway? I just got home, I don't feel like talking, and whenever I do you start asking a million questions and trying to solve problems I didn't even know I had!* What she says to her mom is very different, though. "Actually mom, no, you can't. Not right now." And with that, she grabs her backpack, slings it across her shoulder, and walks upstairs. The door to Lauren's room closes a few moments later.

This is a story that Paula will recount later to Lauren's father, when he comes home from work.

> "I don't understand why it's such a big deal to talk to us," she says, with an edge. "And after all we do for her? I'd think the least she could do is be more open."
>
> "Don't worry about it, Paula. C'mon, she's fifteen. What fifteen-year-old talks to their parents anyway?" Lauren's father offers.
>
> "She talks to you," says Paula, sounding plaintive.
>
> "Yeah, well, I don't know. Maybe it's a father–daughter thing."

But maybe it's not a father–daughter thing. Maybe it's because when Lauren's father asks Lauren a question, he listens and thinks about her response and doesn't immediately jump to the next question. Maybe it's because he doesn't only ask questions, but also volunteers interesting stories or experiences from *his* day, so that it feels to Lauren like a real conversation, not an interrogation. Maybe it's because he doesn't grow alarmed when Lauren says she's fighting with her best friend, and doesn't try to find out exactly what happened, figuring that if his daughter wanted to tell him more about it, she would. Talking with her dad is pleasant for Lauren, and she welcomes it. Not so with her mom, whose urgency and radar-lock attention feel oppressive, and seem to be much more about Paula, than about Paula and Lauren.

How much of this is adolescence, per se, and how much of it is a function of the relationship between Lauren and her mother, and the way they try to communicate with each other?

Unfortunately, because Lauren's parents aren't thinking about the differences in their communication styles, or other things that might account for the contrasting ways in which their daughter relates to each of them, they simply attribute the paucity of communication between Lauren and her mom to Lauren's *being a teenager.* It's an awfully convenient excuse, but a regrettable one as well. It's also a perfect example of how the current American narrative surrounding adolescence has played and continues to play a role in compromising the quality of relationships that parents and teenagers establish with one another.

> "This is exactly how adolescence gets its undeserved reputation for 'sturm und drang,' a self-fulfilling prophesy disguised as developmental theory that lulls parents into complacency with their adolescent's moodiness or defiance. Adolescents really don't have to be all that moody or defiant, and they certainly do not have to be rude. *They're just wired that way,* we've been led to believe, unfortunately. No – they go there because we let them."
>
> Janet Sasson Edgette
>
> from, *The Last Boys Picked: Helping Boys Who Don't Play Sports Survive Bullying and Boyhood*[2]

Adolescent Brain Development and Behavior

> "He couldn't help it because his brain is still maturing…."
>
> Uh, no. By failing to see the difference between teenagers, and teenagers who behave badly, we leave room for things like disrespect and indolence to be understood as a natural part of being a teenager, rather than as a red flag.

Recent advances in brain research support the idea that the adolescent brain is qualitatively different from that of a child or an adult. Dan Siegel's[3] work in particular highlights the significant structural and physiological changes taking place within the brain during adolescence that impact the way teenagers remember, think, reason, focus attention, make decisions, and relate. These changes then drive the emergence of new qualities in teens, such as a search for novelty and the company of peers, emotional intensity, and creative exploration. It's not hard to see how some of these qualities might be expressed impulsively, recklessly, audaciously. But how much do they really account for some of the more aggressive or disrespectful behaviors we see in teenagers?

Saying that your teenager can't control his frankly aggressive temper or his mouth because his brain is still maturing (or his hormones are raging) is a very different conversation than the one Dan Siegel is having about teenagers experiencing an increase in emotional intensity and engaging in riskier behaviors. A teenager who is impulsive or dysregulated, or who plans poorly – for example, maybe we see a kid who's freaking out over a canceled concert or who's doing something stupid, maybe even dangerous – is displaying very different behaviors from one who walks over to his younger brother rummaging through the refrigerator and shoves him out of his way in order to assert his dominance, or a sixteen-year-old who tells her mother to F*@k off! when told to hand over her phone.

Instead of, *Teenagers behave differently because their brains are different,* how about, *Teenagers behave differently AND their brains are different.*

Puberty, hormones, immature brains — these things have been blindly adopted as reasons why teenagers do things that annoy, worry, or enrage their parents. Of the many problems associated with this cultural narrative about adolescence run amok, one of the worst is that parents have come to expect their kids to become defiant, irresponsible, or even rude upon entering adolescence, as if hard-wired for it and predetermined. When their kids oblige, the parents react not with correction but with resigned accommodation. Soon, everything their pre-teens and newly minted teens do is examined through the lens of "typical teen behavior," with so much of it having become normalized.

As soon as we start dismissing bad behavior with excuses such as *They will grow out of it,* or *It's just a phase,* or *It's their hormones,* or *They can't help it because their brains are still developing,* we cloud our own judgment in terms of being able to discern what's really a function of adolescence, and what's really a function of low expectations. And believing those things to be true diminishes everyone involved – teenagers, who are thought to be at the mercy of their physiology and neurobiology, and parents, who are discouraged from expecting more from their teen than the stereotypes about them suggest. By not differentiating between *unchecked* behavior and *undeveloped* behavior, we leave room for unacceptable behavior to be seen as just another part of adolescence.

Brain changes during adolescence are not the reasons why some teenagers display disrespectful or bullying behavior.

One of the more disturbing things about all this is that it's not only American parents who fall into this trap – it's educators and psychologists too, guidance counselors and pediatricians, child psychiatrists and so many others, weaving into the fabric of family life, education, and mental health this idea that adolescence is this mystifying phase of life during which children become insufferable tyrants. Instead of facilitating understanding and compassion between parents and their children, this ugly, inaccurate narrative creates unnecessary conflict, misunderstanding, isolation, and despair. Here's how that happens:

- ***by promoting divisiveness between the generations***

  An "us" versus "them" mentality grows splendidly in a culture where parents are repeatedly warned that once adolescence hits, their son or daughter isn't going to want to talk to them, be seen with them, feel close to them, or listen to them. It proposes a template for parent–teen relations that entrenches families in conflict for years. If you're convinced your teenagers have no interest in speaking with you or listening to you, then you're probably not going to spend a lot of time trying to make that happen. *Why would you bother?* However, the truth of the matter is that most teenagers *do* want to talk with their parents and crave real engagement with them. I sit with teenagers all day long and will say this unequivocally: That despite all the talk about teens wanting to individuate or break free from their parents, what they really want is *connection*, not separation. Becoming independent doesn't mean disconnecting from those who have previously overseen your life. But our steadfast belief in the idea that teenagers are always trying to get as far away from their parents as possible leaves the door open for parents to see their teenager's withdrawal from the family or refusal to communicate as a just another mark of "healthy" adolescence.