

# Adolescent Configuration Styles, Parenting and Psychotherapy

## A Relational Perspective



Bronagh Starrs

“Bronagh Starrs integrates psychological theory, developmental neuroscience, deep clinical wisdom and profound empathy into a highly readable guide that belongs in the hands of anyone who cares for teenagers and their parents. This book brings Starrs’ thinking to life through vivid case examples, a clear organisational structure and practical guidance on how to think about teenagers and the challenges they encounter as they move into adulthood. This book is a gift to anyone looking to deepen their understanding of adolescent development and improve their clinical skills with teenagers and their parents.”

**Lisa Damour, PhD, New York Times bestselling author of *Untangled, Under Pressure, and The Emotional Lives of Teenagers***

“This book is a fantastic contribution to the field of adolescent psychotherapy. There are few who can match Starrs’ depth of phenomenological attunement and degree of therapeutic sensibility with adolescents. She illustrates a masterful approach to understanding and supporting adolescents, capturing concrete therapeutic moments in vivid detail. Her engaging warmth and extraordinary humanity are evident on every page. Adolescent psychotherapists, irrespective of their approach, will find insights and applications to enrich their practice. A must-read for therapists, parents and anyone involved in the lives of teenagers.”

**Richie Sadlier, bestselling author of *Recovering and Let’s Talk***

“This is a wonderful book that delivers a highly informative and useful relational perspective on adolescent configuration styles, parenting and psychotherapy. From beginning to end the book oozes rich and meaningful therapeutic experience and reflection on the challenges and opportunities presented when faced with adolescents who are primarily impulsive, inhibitive or directional in their interactions with the world. Importantly, how these styles develop and manifest is understood in the context of parents’ own configuration styles, with constructive therapeutic solutions to dealing with specific adolescent/parent configurations explained in helpful detail. This is a must-read for anyone engaged in therapeutic work with adolescents, or in any other domain, and for parents, who often feel that they are in the dark when it comes to understanding their child’s behaviour, and often don’t see the role that they can play in how this manifests. This book helpfully shines much-needed light on these processes.”

**Dominic McSherry, PhD, Reader in Psychology, Ulster University and Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma***

“At last, we have a book which offers a framework for understanding the chaos of the teenager’s psychological world, demonstrating to adults how to stay in contact with them. It should be read by therapists, parents and adolescents with similar fascination. Starrs’ approach is very organic and human; validating the adolescent’s subjective experience. She presents solutions which unfold naturally, in a flow of relational understanding. Her relational description of three configuration styles offers ground for therapy work. Parents reading this will understand why their good intentions don’t bring expected results. Adolescents, themselves, might understand why they end up in negative loops of failure and resignation. Therapists and counsellors will find examples of gentle relational work, focused on emotional attunement as well as simple and straightforward concepts. Connecting feelings and behaviour with neurobiology of the brain, Starrs’ work is directed towards development and growth, not on the pathology of adolescence. A joy to read.”

**Irena Bezić, PhD, Co-founder of Centar IGW Zagreb Gestalt Institute, President of EAP (European Association for Psychotherapy)**

“The title of this book captures the process of becoming and being an adolescent and points to the movement involved – this is not a static stage of development. Bronagh captures the dynamic nature of adolescence with her exploration of adolescent configuration styles and parental responses, moving on to provide examples of therapy with parents and adolescents corresponding to the range of configurations. This is the descriptive part of my review of this insightful book, but there is more, Bronagh writes with great perception and wisdom and offers well-researched material including findings from neuroscience research to deepen the reader’s knowledge. My reading of this book took me on a journey through the adolescent minefield and I was enthralled by the examples – they relate so well to my own experience of young people, as a professional and a parent of four. The way the book is structured, with adolescent and parental configurations, leads well to the final part on therapeutics. This is essential reading for all who work therapeutically with adolescents.”

**Sue Pattison, *PhD, Co-Editor, The Sage Handbook of  
Counselling Children and Young People***

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Mental health has become the principal concern as adolescents struggle with a host of issues such as anxiety, academic pressures, gender, substances, social media, complicated family compositions and a vulnerable planet. This book provides psychotherapists with a clear theoretical understanding and practical application for navigating the increasingly complex adolescent experience as young people adjust and respond to the present-day world.

Starrs presents a contemporary understanding of adolescence, identifying three principal character styles and offering experience-near descriptions of the modern-day adolescent. The author demonstrates how each configuration style in adolescence elicits a predictable response in parents and examines the challenges and dilemmas facing parents in today's world, highlighting the patterns and pitfalls which often render parental interventions ineffective. Developmentally attuned parenting strategies are outlined, pertaining to each configuration style. The in-depth analysis of adolescent process and parental response has implications for the therapeutic encounter. Intervention focuses both on one-to-one work with the adolescent and parental involvement. The complexity of working with adolescents and parents who demonstrate psychological entrenchment is also outlined.

This highly readable, original and exceptional contribution is suitable for psychotherapists, allied professionals and parents alike.

**Bronagh Starrs** is creator and programme director of the MSc Adolescent Psychotherapy programme at the Dublin Counselling & Therapy Centre (Dublin) in partnership with University of Northampton. She maintains a private practice in Omagh, Northern Ireland and is the author of *Adolescent Psychotherapy: A Radical Relational Approach* (2019).



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Bronagh Starrs

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For Emily and Odhrán

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As adolescent psychotherapists we do this work so that, despite their struggles and traumas, the young people we meet might feel that they have a life that is worth living. I would like to thank all my colleagues, students and graduates for sharing in and nurturing my passion for this radically transformational time in people's lives. I continue to be inspired by their commitment to showing up for adolescents and my thinking has been enriched by our ongoing dialogue.

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# Introduction

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This book explores how young people, their parents and their therapists experience the phenomenon of adolescence. Despite the mood swings, reckless behaviours, relentless overthinking and crippling anxiety, adolescence is not nearly as perplexing as adults perceive it to be. Fascinated by this stage of human development, I have made it my life's work to attempt to reach the heart of adolescent experience and help these young people more fluently navigate these years. In order to do so, I have paid close attention to the manner in which adolescents construct their worlds – identifying evolving patterns in their self-perception, contact style and behaviours during this time of radical transformation.

Having been involved in the training and supervision of many practitioners during my career, the one prevailing clinical dilemma which has most captured my interest is how to establish a developmentally transformative relationship with an adolescent. I hear therapists express the same binds over and over: *How do you talk to them? How do you get them to open up? When do you involve parents? What do you say to these parents? Why do my interventions fall flat?* Many therapists I talk to have a great capacity to develop rapport with young clients who, in turn, value the connection and keep showing up. However, all too often, these clinicians report feeling stuck in the work. Whilst the relationship has been well established, transformative potential is limited and developmental momentum is stalling. My first book *Adolescent Psychotherapy: A Radical Relational Approach* presents a developmentally and phenomenologically attuned methodology, offering strategic guidance to clinicians from the assessment process right through to specific clinical presentations and case management issues.

In this second book I frame the experience of adolescence as a progression through increasingly sophisticated psychological, emotional, behavioural and interpersonal levels of functioning. Development of the self during adolescence typically happens in three stages: 1) Boundaries from childhood and the adult world are established, behind which adolescents find ways to connect more deeply with peers whilst being motivated to do what they feel like doing. Self is experienced in relation to impulses: adults and homework are annoying; friends and gaming are cool. Peer-acceptance equates to self-acceptance as the interpersonal landscape is radically transformed. 2) The deepening of internal experience takes place, with a

narcissistic quality of self-absorption emerging in order to facilitate a deeper knowing of the self. Adolescents look inward in order to develop a stronger self-image, though without much psychological stability, it can feel like they are locked in a fairground hall of mirrors. Self, at this stage, is experienced with personal intensity and often with a good deal of insecurity and existential angst. 3) These prior stages of emerging selfhood set the scene for increasing self-assurance and lifespace balance as adolescents begin to have a deeper sense of security in who they are. Their increased psychological anchoring and self-possession extend to interpersonal contact and future planning. Whilst full adulthood is still a long way off, they are moving in the right direction. At least that is what we expect will happen...

The adolescent journey is fraught with trauma, complexity and inadequate lifespace support for many, and so the developmental trajectory is not always sequential nor does the experience of being a teenager unfold in coherent stages. Whilst each young person's lifespace is uniquely individual, over the years in my work as a psychotherapist, I have noted clusters of similar patterns, challenges and dilemmas which emerge for young people during the adolecing process. I refer to these clusters as configuration styles and have organised these into three principal configurations: *impulsive*, *inhibitive* and *directional*. In this volume, I present to the reader the essential features which are particular to each of these configurations. These developmental phenomena also tend to elicit predictable responses from parents, which can sometimes shape the parent-adolescent relationship in unproductive ways. For some young people these configuration styles map on to their developmental journey in a manner which resembles a stage model, as they move through each configuration in a temporal and sequential manner. For others, many of whom find themselves in a psychotherapist's office, they remain relatively entrenched in one or other of these configuration styles and may not progress through other configurations.

In recent years the field of neuroscience has shed more light on the science behind the art of psychotherapy, translating our experiential knowing into pragmatic description of the mechanics of nervous system functioning. These contributions have offered psychotherapists a rich lens through which to more deeply perceive the physiological, psychological and interpersonal changes which occur during adolescence. I remain fascinated in the mutually influential relationship between developmental experience and the adolescent brain. Drawing on this research in order to help adolescents, parents and professionals understand how the brain is developing and how this is both impacting on and is impacted by their lifespace experience, I find that it is best to keep the science very straightforward and uncomplicated. My reductionist approach, whilst overly simplistic, makes the knowledge accessible and supports the therapeutic enterprise. As a therapist, brain structures and functions are not foregrounded nor are they the central organising principle of my understanding and intervention. That said, I see the value of using neuroscience research to help explain psychological phenomena. From a therapeutic point of view, the aim is to informally and conversationally integrate some

relevant neuroscience discoveries in order to foster curiosity, understanding and growth.

In these pages, I explore contemporary adolescent presentation and offer ways to support the healthy unfolding of developmental process. The principal aim of this book is to enhance therapeutic practice. Analysis of the contextual factors which shape the adolecing process is complex and, although fascinating for me, is the subject of other works. And whilst we know quite a lot, there is still much to determine about so many aspects of adolescence: the unevenness of development between boys and girls; why adolescents, in response to similar situations and traumas, creatively adjust in radically different ways; and why some adolescents become entrenched in self-defeating behaviours. As we continue to advance our knowledge of the factors which shape adolescent experience, this will enable us to develop increasingly attuned and effective adult-world responses.

The book is divided into three sections. Part 1 offers a description of configuration styles which I recognise as typical during the adolescent years, tracking the developmental features and challenges which are evident at various points throughout the adolescent journey. The opening chapters offer an experience-near description of the adolescent's developmental location, exploring the drives and developmental limitations of particular configuration styles and making sense of their often questionable and sometimes problematic presentation. Chapter 1 sets out the impulsive configuration style – with the draw to feel good and the seeking of validation within the peer landscape becoming figural at this stage. Childhood motivations are radically transformed, and self-acceptance is now equated with peer-acceptance as belonging becomes vital. The following chapter discusses the experience of entrenched impulsivity whereby adolescents become embedded in this configuration style, recycling through themes of indulgence and risk-taking, with the anticipated fallout and lack of developmental momentum. Struggles with mood dysregulation and limited self-discipline are documented. Chapter 3 offers a descriptive summary of the inhibitive adolescent who has a propensity towards self-conscious preoccupation and anxious rumination. Chapter 4 details the inhibitive adolescent's anxious lifespace which becomes infused with negativity and restriction, typical of so many teenagers in today's world. The final chapter in this section deals with the directional adolescent who has developed a degree of emotional and behavioural stability. For some adolescents this is evidence of psychological health and a strong sense of self; for others it is a creative adjustment to suffering.

Young people can be notoriously difficult to reach and influence during the teenage years and the experience can be challenging for parents at times. Part 2 explores adolescence from a parenting perspective, examining parenting styles and typical responses to situations and predicaments which frequently arise when raising teenagers. This section details commonly employed intuitive parenting strategies and outlines why they don't tend to be particularly effective. Parenting adolescents is not always a straightforward process and parents often find themselves at an

impasse, not knowing how to help or influence their adolescent. It is at this point that psychotherapy is sought for the teenager, however mum or dad are usually also in need of support in order to transcend the powerlessness and overwhelm which has so often come to characterise their parenting experience. Involving parents in psychotherapeutic work, I have examined the dynamics of the adolescent-parent relationship and how teenage children are impacted by parental interaction. Over the years, having witnessed countless contact episodes unfold in front of me or having them described to me, after the fact, by adolescents or their concerned and exasperated parents, I have come to anticipate predictable, yet often unhelpful, intuitive parenting strategies. In Chapter 6, I provide a general overview of parents' configuration and contact style in relation to their capacity to attune to adolescent children. The following three chapters, in turn, explore the experience of parenting impulsive, inhibitive and directional adolescents, highlighting the issues and relational patterns which are distinctive to each configuration style. In order to skilfully assist their teenage children by implementing developmentally attuned strategies, parents require a level of insight, commitment and self-possession. In this section, I also explore how some parents themselves struggle as the result of the legacy of entrenched modes of being during their own adolescence and how this shows up in the clinical situation.

Part 3 focuses on therapeutics, demonstrating how to create a relationally and developmentally informed therapeutic space for both the adolescent and their parents. A trove of developmentally attuned macro interventions is offered. In this section I introduce *SandSPACE*, a developmental technique I have created which supports the process for the adolescent, parent and therapist. Case vignettes are also included throughout in order to illuminate theory. Chapter 10 concerns therapeutic intervention with impulsive adolescents, supporting these young people to access greater consideration, discipline, self-reflection and choicefulness. After this comes a focus on parental intervention, exploring effective ways to guide parents to become more influential and to ensure richer relationship with their impulsive teenagers. Chapters 12 and 13 relate to the therapeutic enterprise with inhibitive adolescents, addressing the developmental dilemma of supporting these young people to shift from a posture of fear and passivity to adoption of greater ownership of their lives. The steps to support developmental momentum through engagement with parents of inhibitive adolescents are also outlined. Finally, Chapter 14 explores working with directional adolescents and their parents.

The reader will come to see that each configuration style in adolescence has a corresponding parenting strategy and distinct quality of therapeutic contact and style of intervention. As anyone who is attempting to parent, educate, mentor, engage therapeutically or support an adolescent in any other personal or professional capacity can attest to, a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate in today's world. Our demeanour, our reactions and our approach when encountering a hell-raising, drug-taking party animal who could care less about his education are wildly different when we are faced with a highly anxious, overthinking perfectionist on

the brink of an eating disorder; and different again when we are in the presence of a mature, balanced and resourceful inspiration whom we have to remember is still only fifteen. These days, parenting and therapeutic work require three principal levels of strategic approach depending on the developmental location of any given adolescent. That is a tall order!

This book is based on my clinical experience. The aim is not to situate it in a body of research, but to propose a framework based on that clinical experience which may be helpful for therapists working with adolescents. It portrays both the typical adolescent journey as well as the more problematic experience of entrenchment, exploring configuration dynamics and identifying relevant parental and therapeutic interventions. In sharing with the reader this way of organising understanding and intervention through the lens of configuration styles, it is my hope that this novel perspective will be clinically useful and transferrable to the clinician's own therapeutic practice. Attuned and rich contact with struggling adolescents and their parents can accomplish so much more than the reducing of symptoms or modifying of behaviour. Its transformative potential can support the reconfiguration of the adolescent lifespace in the direction of increasing integrity.