

A Connection Epiphany

by Linda M. Clement

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I had one of those epiphanies the other day. They happen from time to time and I love the way they open up a space in my head in entirely new ways. I was thinking about adolescent behaviour and risk-taking, and what that behaviour is for. Of course, this stands on my belief that all behaviour is for something both sensible and real, no matter how bizarre or illogical it may seem.

I had noticed that 'rebellion' isn't to benefit the teen's body. Drinking way too much is humiliating and painful, sometimes in ways that last a lifetime.

Why do teens do things that appear to be courting disastrous outcomes?

Rare is the teen who thinks getting sleepless nights and lots of laundry to do courtesy of some helpless, crying person is attractive. I can't say I've run into a single person crazy enough to think AIDS might be fun to try, even just for a little while. Even tobacco breath is gross and undesirable.

Why do teens do things that appear to be courting just these (and much worse) outcomes? (And when did

'outcomes' become a word?)

And then it struck me... There is a reason why this behaviour is not seen in cultures outside our own. There is a reason why these extremes are more and more common and why there are more people lamenting the breakdown of the family and its effect on the next generation than ever before: because people don't have time for kids much anymore. And, worse, kids notice.

Parents' love

That parents love their children and would do almost anything for them is a given—an absolute, I would say, if I didn't know so much about some pretty messed up dysfunctional people and their parents— but for the average parent, a certainty. Mothers and father love their children unequivocally, even unconditionally.

Stopping that love is impossible, in my experience ... it is what drives our desire to see our kids survive their teen years, and to thrive as adults. I think it was Phyllis Diller who said: deciding to have a child is deciding to let your heart walk around outside your body for the rest of your life.

Parental love is, unfortunately, not the issue.

I realized that children —teens— provoke their parents using risky behaviour. They are not blowing off their curfews for well-thought-out and intentional reasons. They are

expressing fury. They are angry at parents or other authorities, and need to find effective ways to meet the needs that are going unmet.

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If they need their parents' passionate attention, they need only stay out 5½ hours later than they are allowed. It is particularly effective if,

- a) it's the very first time they've been so much as 4 minutes late, or;
- b) it's the 27th night in a row, getting progressively later and later every day in spite of threats and punishment designed to curtail it.

It is 100% more effective if the response to the frantic or furious parent is something aloof and irresponsible like 'so?' or straight up defiance à la 'I don't have to do what you tell me to do.'

A furious example

It was watching Dr. Phil or Oprah or some talk show that I realized that the surly child in the hotseat was not stupid. She wasn't confused, either. She was angry. The angry faces she made with the most passion were made facing her mother.

She was dressing inappropriately,

with far too much makeup and not nearly enough fabric, and admitted that she didn't know what she was doing or why.

The 'expert' didn't pick up on her anger, but he did catch the damaged connection. This daughter was in need of her mother's attention, her time, her care and her love in real, concrete and clear ways —which she got as they went shopping for more appropriate clothing.

Lots of experts tell parents that what the child needs is firm guidelines to show them they are loved and cared for. I think it is only the last part of that, the demonstration that they are loved and cared for and not the guidelines, that children are really looking for.

Demonstrating love

Showing kids they are loved and cared for is the key —but it isn't simple magic. The purpose of doing this, of maintaining the connection (and rebuilding it if necessary) is not so the parents can show the child that they love him. It is so that the child will love and honour the parents back —so he will be concerned about and care for the emotional balance of his parents.

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That was the epiphany: I'm not toiling away at the connection with my kids solely so they know they are

loved, but so that I know they care about my feelings and choose not to do things to themselves knowing that they will hurt me.

Linda Clement is a parenting coach, and writer of many things, working with Raising Parents Inc.
lindaclement@raisingparents.net
lindaclement.blogspot.ca
www.raisingparents.net