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Expert Advice for Parents on Connecting with Teens

Tara Brown offers holistic approach to helping kids

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They call her the "teen whisperer." Tara Brown, who has been an educator and life coach for more than 20 years, specializes in reaching teens when they need help the most. The modern teenager's life is full of a surprising amount of stress from demands and expectations, according to Brown. That stress, combined with social pressures and inexperience, can quickly lead teens to a troubled state. Brown helps teens - and their parents - cope with the challenges of budding adulthood.

"Stress and time management are huge issues for teens," said Brown. "In the past 20 years, our country has been in fast forward mode. Our families used to have a low-key atmosphere for family meals and time together. I am amazed at how few families have dinner together now. There are even T.V.'s in the back of the car so we don't talk to each other even when we are driving. Beyond that, there are cell phones and IPODs plugged into our ears. We are seeing this disconnect, which is one of the biggest challenges between parents and kids."



Photo Submitted
 Tara Brown is a life coach with a holistic approach to working with kids. She owns her own consulting business, Learners Edge Consulting.

Brown says that parents are often afraid of entering into conflict with their teens. For that reason, instead of standing their ground on issues like curfews and social allowances, parents yield to giving their teens the freedom they think they want.

"It is so important that parents not give their teens a level of freedom that they can't handle," Brown said. "Parents think they need to back off, when in reality their teens need contact from them more than ever."

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According to Brown, an important part of the brain called the Executive Register is not fully developed until a person is in their thirties. For that reason, teens physically do not have the decision making abilities that adults do.

"If parents can grab hold of that concept; that a teen's brain is not physically capable of complete impulse control, then they can have a whole new understanding of how to interact with their teen," said Brown. "The Executive Register is the part of the brain that controls impulse. The mature response to a situation is 'ready, aim fire.' For a teen, that process is more like, 'ready, fire, aim.' Their impulse control is simply not developed."

Brown works one-on-one with teens to help them develop the sense of accountability that they might be missing. She helps them to feel empowered to achieve their goals. She also helps them to be introspective and ask themselves questions like "what do I want and how do I get there?"

"A lot of kids can't even look past this weekend," said Brown. "I help them take off their blinders and really envision their life. We really work on self assessment. I help them figure out what the 'why' is."

A thorough questionnaire helps teens asses what their true passions in life are.

"I ask them if there is anything that they do that they get so absorbed in that they don't even come up for air, and before they know it, a few hours have passed," she explained. "Whether that is playing a sport, drawing or listening to music, those are clues to what their true mission in life might be. There has to be something in life that really means something to them; something that they will sacrifice for."

Brown says that such self-discovery is a critical part of the teen years and something that requires a tremendous amount of guidance on behalf of parents and other adult mentors. She estimates that it takes at least five or six adults in a teen's life to successfully guide them along the way. Unfortunately, she summates that most kids are lucky if they have one or two adults who really care about them.

The process of self-discovery makes a parent's involvement in their teen's life even more critical.

"Parents must carve out quality time to spend with their teen," she said. "If there has been a gap in communication, they have to find the time to communicate and talk with their teen. If a parent hasn't done that in a while, it's going to take time. There needs to be a concentrated effort."

The lack of communication between parents and teens is reaching what Brown is calling "epidemic proportions."

"Parents don't understand how to communicate with their teens," she explained. "Quality time can be as simple as going to a ballgame together."

The high divorce rate in the U.S. - which Brown says is close to 70-percent - and parents working overtime to live beyond their means is costing our nation's teens dearly, according to Brown.

"Kids are bombarded by families unraveling," she said. "The majority of parents live paycheck to paycheck; in every economic sector. There is just not enough time left for family if parents are working long hours just to keep up with the bills. Parents think that teens want to start breaking away from the family, but the opposite is true. They need attention just as much as younger kids do. For some reason we have lost sight of that."

Brown also recommends that parents take time for themselves as well. She says it is important for teens to see their parents set an example by taking good care of themselves.

"Taking time for you, as a parent, should not imply guilt," she said. "Taking care of your health by enjoying exercise and quiet time will make you a better person, which will make you a better parent in the long run. Kids need to learn that so that they will know how to live healthy, too."

In short, Brown is calling for a paradigm shift in the way teens are parented in this country.

"Finance is the No.1 cause of family stress," she said. "We have to put our priorities in order. Family time is more important than money or things. I can guarantee that every kid I have worked with would gladly give up the Lexus in the driveway and the fancy zip code if they could have more time with their parents. Trust me; time with parents is what our teens need the most."

Tara Brown is a life coach with a holistic approach to working with kids. She owns her own consulting business, Learners Edge Consulting. Brown works with kids throughout the Nashville area, including Williamson County. For more information, visit the Web site: www.LearnersEdgeConsulting.org or send an e-mail to: TBrown@LearnersEdgeConsulting.org.

1 Communicate! Dedicate time to reconnect on a level with good dialogue.

2 Embrace the concept that kids, as teens, need involved adults more than at any other time in their life.

3 Realize that conflict between teens and parents is inevitable. It is a healthy and vital part of the developmental process in a teenager's life. How a parent responds to that and interacts with their teen is critical. Don't give up. Teens need the message that their parents care enough to stand their ground and set boundaries.

4 Parents need to realize how stressed kids are today. Sometimes kids don't have a choice about the stresses in their life, but they can learn how to deal with them. They may need outside help to learn to cope with stress while achieving their life goals. Skills they learn as teens will be with them throughout their life.

5 Find time for family.

6 Parents need to set an example of taking care of their own health by

making time for exercise and for relaxation. That sends a really powerful message to kids of all ages.