Adolescent Touchpoints: Keeping Parents and Teenagers Connected

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www.brazelton touchpoints.org
Brazelton Touchpoints Center Vision:

IMAGINE a world in which all children grow up to be adults who can:

• cope with adversity,
• strengthen their communities,
• constructively participate in civic life,
• steward our planet’s resources, and
• experience the joys of nurturing the next generation to be prepared to do the same.

brazeltontouchpoints.org
What is the work of the Brazelton Touchpoints Center?
To restore the position of babies and children as the first priority of communities and societies everywhere
Why first priority?

When babies and children are first priority, everything else falls into place, **and the future comes into focus**, the babies and children of our children, and theirs, and theirs.

For example:

- Natural and built environments
- Infrastructure
- Economic development, employment
- Health, education, social services
- Community structures, processes, resources
- Culture

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Why restore?

Powerful, and often, inadvertent, unrecognized forces can overwhelm this biological imperative and throw human systems off course.

In many communities and societies around the world, priorities have deviated from the biological imperative of the protection and nurturing of children.
Why Touchpoints?
Stressors on Families

• Workplace demands on families
• Changes in family structures and roles
• Increased family mobility and isolation
• Increased economic challenges for families
• Stressed education, health and social services
• Erosion of family traditions, neighborhoods and community connections
Challenges: Threats to the Development of Living Beings
(Remember the 12 Stressors on Families Today?)

• Climate Change, natural resource scarcity, natural disasters
• Inter-nation/inter-ethnic conflict
  (the bloody intergenerational cycle of fear, trauma, hatred)
• Inequitable economics
• Displacement of family and community cultures

Risks and opportunities of
• Globalization
• Digital technology – race to the bottom of the brainstem---Disruption of human interactions and relationships
• Artificial intelligence

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Stressors on Adolescents Today

- Social Media:
  - FOMO,
  - Instagram appearance anxiety,
  - cyber bullying,
  - Sexting
  - Pheromone deprivation
  - Nonverbal communication developmental delay

- Climate Change: “in our lifetimes”
- Guns in Schools
- Sexual orientation, gender identity - crossroads of societal change
- Culture wars, cultural erosion, values diffusion
The change we strive for... we know how to do this
How do we do this work?
What is adolescence?

• An historical invention
• A cultural construct
• A neurohormonal physiological phenomenon
• Not sure, but it starts at 9 years old and ends at 35
• Here today, gone tomorrow
Unpacking Adolescence

Differences and similarities:

• Individual
• Family
• Neighborhood
• Community
• Cultural
• Socio-economic
• Political climate
• Historical era
• Technological affordances and risks
Why Touchpoints? – A relational approach

• Reaffirm parents’ expertise
Why reaffirm parental expertise?

Professional cultures over-estimate

• the universality of Western child development knowledge,

• the possibility of a single “science of parenting”, and

• the capacity of professional institutions and systems to promote healthy development.
Technical vs. Adaptive challenges or

• Parenting is primarily an adaptive challenge

• Technical challenges in parenting that can be handled with techniques that can be taught, learned and replicated, for example
  • changing a diaper
Parenting is primarily an adaptive challenge

Adaptive solutions emerge based on
• specific contexts, e.g., the specific, parent, child and circumstances

Adaptive solutions depend on
• specific resources, conditions and capacities.
Why reaffirm parental expertise?
Professional cultures overlook or under-estimate:

- Local knowledge of child development and childrearing
- Community capacity for promoting healthy development
Scientific Revolution: Old Paradigm for Human Development

• From scientific reductionism - linear causality

A causes B
Scientific Revolution: (not so) New Paradigm for Human Development: complexity and emergence

To Systems theory
Systems Leadership for Systemic Challenge, Systemic Solutions

Three core capabilities of systems leaders to foster collective leadership

1. See the larger system

2. See taken for granted assumptions, hear different points of view, recognize the beginnings of solutions within them

3. Shift from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future
How does change happen?

• What processes lead to developmental change?

• Can understanding how developmental change happens lead to better preventive interventions and more effective promotion of healthy development?
Touchpoints: disorganization and reorganization

The term “touchpoints” was first coined by T. Berry Brazelton to describe temporary periods of

• developmental disorganization for the child and family, followed by
• reorganization and the emergence of new developmental capacities.

Touchpoints: Una matriz del desarrollo

- El desarrollo se forma de momentos de désorganización y de réorganización, de aceleración y de désaceleración
Touchpoints: A Developmental Model

Development is characterized by regressions, bursts, and pauses.
Non-human primate evidence for disorganization-reorganization developmental model

• Predictable transitional periods alternate with stable periods
• Regression: baby chimp more demanding, regresses, clingy, stays closer to mother
• Conflict: mother pushes baby –to discover new potential for greater independence

• Predictable Stress: conflict within child, child-parent interactions, and among adults

• *Vulnerability as opportunity for* learning and strengthening relationships

• *Vulnerability as risk for* parental sense of failure, incompetence, ineffectiveness, child abuse
Effects of touching in

Mechanisms for these effects are thought to include the family-provider relationships in which
• parental competence,
• parental confidence and
• the positive power of development
are affirmed during these developmental crises.

These are times when parents worry about
• their children’s development and
• their own effectiveness as parents.

The parent-clinician relationship –guided by the Touchpoints approach- is also thought to absorb stresses and worries that can interfere with the capacity to form shared states of consciousness.
Myths about Adolescent Development

• Development is linear, continuous
• Each stage of progress is followed by another
• Adolescents need to separate, become independent
• To separate, adolescents need to rebel, make trouble
Overview

• Development advances through periods of disorganization and reorganization

• EXPECT MESSINESS

• Staying connected and a sense of purpose

hold the pieces together as child and family disorganize, then reorganize with new capacities and skills
Adolescent Brain Development is Disorganizing

• vulnerability
• need for structure, supervision and guidance
Adolescent Brain Development involves Risk and Opportunity

• Novelty seeking
• Risk taking
• Experimentation, innovation, learning
• Growing capacity
• Expanding horizons
Examples of ADOLESCENT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

• Prefrontal cortex synaptogenesis

• Amygdala vs. Frontal lobe role in facial expression recognition
  Baird et al. Functional Magnetic resonance Imaging of facial Affect Recognition in Children and Adults. JAACAP 38:2 2/99

• Myelination

• Pruning:
Adolescent Brain: Primary motivation vs. inhibitory circuitry


- Dopamine, gabaminergic, glutamatergic neurotransmitters in prefrontal cortical-striatal-thalamic cortical pathways, influenced by hormonal conditions, may favor novelty seeking while inhibitory circuitry (serotonergic) remains incomplete favoring adolescent novelty-seeking

- Adaptive for new learning, but increases risk for substance abuse and other dangers

- With maturation, capacity to learn new info decreases as capacity to use previously learned info increases: wisdom comes later
Parents’ Touchpoint: disorganization and reorganization

• Fall from the pedestal
• Parents’ own adolescence
• Giving up control, losing supports
• The mold is set; it counts now
• Facing adolescent sexuality
• Falling out of love? Unrealized dreams
• Mid-life crisis, adolescent questioning
• Separation and loss
Preadolescent Touchpoints

CHILD
• Irritability
• Devaluation

PARENT
• Withdrawal and Reconnection
Adolescent Touchpoints

Identity construction
• hope vs. self-fulfilling prophecies
• idealization and devaluation: a new integration

Reconfiguring Family Intimacy
• parental distance and the myth of adolescent independence: a new balance
• staying connected
• from dependence to interdependence
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION
Self-fulfilling prophecies vs. hope

• "The Secret Lives of Teens" - media focus on small minority of "troubled youths"
• Positive expectations
• Positive identifications
• A coherent story about where I come from, who I am, and where I am going
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION
Idealization and Devaluation

« Parents are dorks. I don’t know anyone who thinks there parents are normal. »

• Parents lose their pedestals, adolescents, their heroes.
• Replacing the ideal and the devalued with the real, and, eventually – acceptance
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: Idealization and Devaluation

« The worst part is that I know some day I’ll be just like them. »

• Adolescents reassess their parents now that they can
• But adolescents also reassess themselves
• Adolescent questioning/Parent mid-life crisis
• Parents also reconsider their idealization of their child
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION
A Sense of Purpose:
Community Service Programs

Teen Outreach Program (random assignment evaluation 7 yr f/u): 32% lower course failure rate, 37% lower school suspension rate, 43% lower pregnancy rate, 75% lower school dropout rate compared to controls

Valued Youth Program (middle school-random assignment evaluation 2 yr f/u); improved reading grades, lowered drop out rates (1% in program, 12% in control group)
RECONFIGURING FAMILY INTIMACY
Myth of Adolescent Independence and Parents’ Distance

• Instead, shift in distance/closeness patterns, new configuration of interdependence

• Challenge of interpreting cues (e.g. pushing away to pull a parent in)

• Challenge of remaining engaged despite criticisms and testing

• Parents are still needed: adolescents’ brains are still developing; « apraxia »
Connections: staying in touch

• Resnick et al « Protecting Adolescents From Harm – findings from the National Adolescent Longitudinal Health Study » JAMA Sept 10, ’97-Vol 278, No 10) - 93,000 adolescents in N.C., Minn.

• Parent-child closeness assessed:

« Most of the time your parent is warm and loving to you »
« You are satisfied with the way your parent and you communicate with each other »
« Overall, you are satisfied with your relationship with your parent »
Emotional availability in relationships promotes development
Challenges to emotional availability

• Isolation
• Sense of powerlessness, disenfranchisement
• Overwhelming stress
• Depression
• Substance abuse
• Domestic violence
• Threatened survival
Emotional availability can come from a web of relationships that gives caregivers strength and hope:

Strength to learn from and face their mistakes

Hope for
- their child’s development
- their future as a family
- their world
Connections

Crucial measure of child’s closeness to parent

• 5 out of 7 meals as a family in past week
Connections

Importance of Parental Involvement

**Smoking:** 42% of 15 – 16 y.o. who don’t feel close to parents smoke, 26% smoke who do;

34% who don’t eat dinner regularly with parents smoke, 25 % smoke who do

**Drinking:** 2 x higher prevalence in 15 – 16 y.o. who don’t feel close or do not have meals together as compared with those who do
Connections

• **Drug use:** 50% of 15-16 y.o. who aren’t close to parents used MJ, as opposed to 24% of those who are

• **Violence:** 40% involved in serious fights who aren’t close to parents, 30% who are

• **Suicide:** thoughts 3x more likely in teens who aren’t close, attempts 2x more likely

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CONNECTIONS

• *Sex*: 50% of those who don’t have frequent meals have sex by age 15 or 16, 32% who do
Discipline – and Staying Connected

• Discipline is second only to love
• Discipline can preserve and even strengthen parent-adolescent connections

• Goal of discipline is self-discipline, not punishment (you won’t always be there)

• Punishment fits crime, helps solve problem, allows forgiveness, reinforces respect for parental authority
Pro-active discipline

• Set expectations early and uphold consistently

• Anticipate predictable problems before they occur

• Discuss family’s values before the crisis; model family’s values
Anticipatory Discipline is Teaching

• Anticipate limits of parental controls – enlist child to take some ownership of these areas (safety, health, well-being, treatment of others, school etc.), honor her stake in these

• Anticipatory discipline as skill-building, e.g. time management, leading to self-discipline
Discipline

• Safety/Containment
• Handle your anger first: limits are not retaliation
• Care enough to risk your child’s anger
• United front
• Pick battles
• Absolute prohibition of predictable behaviors forces them into hiding
• Limits must be enforceable: protection, reparation
• Don’t protect from external consequences
• Be prepared for objections
• Parents’ modeling, e.g., humility
• Understand behavior as a communication
Communication

• Listen, don’t lecture
• Allow child to speak first, to finish sentences. Don’t interrupt
• Leave room for silences
• One question at a time, to show interest not distrust
• Rephrase to understand
• LOOK FOR THE POSITIVES!
Communication

• Ask again – « is that how I should understand this? »
• Avoid defensiveness, even to criticism
• Don’t sound as if you have all the answers
• Use « I » instead of « you » statements
• Avoid generalizing: « you always/never...»
• Be open about concerns, phrase w/ respect
• Back out of legalistic arguments: « Do we really want to be talking with each other this way? »
Adolescents hate

• Adult generalizations about them
• Lectures (two or more consecutive sentences from an adult, especially when in conflict)
• Interrogations (any uninterrupted series of two or more questions)
• Judgement
• Responsibilities taken away
• Isolation – from peers, but also family
Adolescents will tolerate

• Expectations that they are in general thoughtful, reasonable
• Assumptions that their anger may be justified, understandable, as painful for them as for target
• A single question asked by an adult who does not assume he already knows the answer, that respects adolescent’s motivations, and invites self-reflection
• Recognition and valuing of adolescent’s responsibilities
• Adult company, and affection
• Adults who admit their mistakes, who forgive, and know when to apologize
Parent connections: containing adolescents by building parent communities

- Get to know your child’s friends’ parents
- Talk together about your fears, hopes, goals, expectations, limits, rules