

What Teachers Wish Parents Knew

By Joy Libby

I am lucky to count many teachers as friends, some of whom have taught my own children over the years. There was a clutch of preschool teachers who get in the trenches of the sandbox and have a bottomless well of creativity and there were brave middle school teachers who face hormones and high-stakes social scenes while trying to teach algebra. I love all of them but wouldn't want to be any of them -- I am not made of tough enough stuff to face their days.

As I understand it, teaching is more of a calling than a vocation. Exceptional teachers, who realize this and lean into the insanity of the job, show up each day ready to minister. Here's the understatement of the year -- teachers make an actual, measurable difference in our world.

In quiet conversations with my teaching pals, most of whom teach at private schools and see their work as inspiring and impactful, I hear one main obstacle that always floats to the surface. This consistent problem keeps them from job satisfaction, from joyfully bettering students' lives, and from creative educational experiments. This hindrance makes them want to keep their heads down, their voices quiet and simply get through their days. Drum roll, please: it's the parents!

Sadly, it appears that two really huge and helpful groups of people -- parents and teachers -- are both loving our next generation and resenting each other in the process. Although I am technically only in the parent camp, I think my friendship with particular teachers has allowed me to

comprehend both sides. The truth is that everyone wants the same thing: to support children as they grow and learn. I offer here a few thoughts to chew on for both groups.

What Teachers wish Parents Knew

Teachers are real people with real lives -- they buy alcohol and sometimes they get cancer. During non-school hours, teachers have other things going on. At BevMo, I ran into a first-grade teacher with a cart filled to the brim with bottles. She acted like a kid with her hand caught in the cookie jar. "I'm throwing an engagement party for my roommate," she stammered. I tried to put her at ease by saying I had assumed all the alcohol was for a purpose; she laughed and told me how she always fears running into parents around town because they seem surprised that she has other parts to her life. Sadly, one year, while a teacher friend faced diagnosis, chemotherapy, hair loss, nausea, and reconstructive surgery, her biggest challenge by far was how the parents of her fourth-grade class treated her. They made her feel that her illness showed a lack of consideration for her students and was an inconvenience to the parents. "Not on my tuition dime," was the sentiment from a father who was mad that the school hadn't fired her for missing so many days. (What a self-centered piece of shizzle, huh?) She was essentially asked to apologize for having cancer. I asked a friend "If your best friend or sister had cancer, can you imagine feeling anything but compassion for her?"

Takeaway: reflect on whether your actual treatment of teachers implies that you see them as one-dimensional and always at your disposal.

The pressure and tension you create when you call the dean instead of speaking directly to a teacher makes it much harder to partner with you. It feels as if a quiet war is being waged between parents and teachers -- a battle for power. Parents are wearing down teachers, draining them of their confidence, grasping for the upper hand, and slowly sucking the joy out of



"Parents, we wish you'd focus on what your kid really needs. Teachers notice the kid who is excluded and needs to eat lunch with them in the classroom, who needs extra help in English or extra time for an assignment, who really needs an evening tutor, or who has anxiety and who has stopped eating."

their jobs. Unfortunately, as parents win this battle, their children lose. How much personal fulfillment and joy can you imagine feeling at the end of six months, when your every move is scrutinized and reported by a teenager? Parents need to sift through the stories and realize a child is talking. A possibility exists that even though your child truly believes what she is saying, he may have misinterpreted what actually happened. Teachers wish parents would stop talking to each other about their disappointments and stop firing off emails to the head of school. How about just speaking directly to the teacher in question? This simple change would replace a critical, nervous, fear-based atmosphere with one of openness and trust. Parents can still have gripes and even disagree with a teacher's course of action, but they'd stop treating the teacher as if he needs to be tattled on and involve him in the discussion. That said -- This is very difficult for parents to do. Many parents have been neck deep in scenarios like this with a teacher and I believe that everything their child is telling them is 100% accurate. We aren't there to witness what went wrong, but we believe our kid over the teacher. So there we are. *Takeaway:* How would you like to be treated?

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What Teachers Wish Parents Knew *(continued from page 1)*

Parents, we wish you'd focus on what your kid really needs. Teachers see the kid who routinely shows up tardy, without a jacket, forgetting to turn in the permission slip on time, tired from staying up too late, forgetting books left at the other parent's house and with shoes that need new laces. Teachers notice the kid who is excluded and needs to eat lunch with them in the classroom, who needs extra help in English or extra time for an assignment, who really needs an evening tutor, or who has anxiety and who has stopped eating. Teachers wish parents were open to hearing about these things. Instead, parents tend to focus on the final letter grade given (and how it compares to others), or who was picked for the play or the first-string volleyball team, or if there is too much or too little homework. Parents often focus on the 30,000-foot issues better left to the school, but miss the on-the-ground, day-to-day real-life problems of their children.

Takeaway: It is a parent's job to raise their kid and a teacher's job to teach their kid, both are critical and both have to live up to the bargain.

Things Parents wish Teachers knew

We are parenting in a fear-based culture.

Parents can't choose to raise kids at a different time in history; now is what we've got. Current culture constantly sends parents messages of worry and fear about their children, and indicates that every single moment, incident or encounter might break them permanently. Parents have responded to this fear by

hovering, over-helping, and sometimes by accusing teachers of not doing enough for their kids. They are scared that their children will not succeed in life. No longer are parents happy to let an eight-year-old enjoy second grade; they feel pressure to shape her into the next Steve Jobs. Parents really need teachers to help counter these messages. Instead of scoffing at or mocking current parenting trends, teachers can help by simply offering parents the assurance that they care deeply about kids, and that they'll let us know when to worry. It's extremely hard to be the only parents not getting into a tizzy about the ERB scores or verbalizing that our kid doesn't have to be the best at everything.

Takeaway: Teachers should cut parents some slack by acknowledging the pressure they feel from society and then gently explain how parents can trust the system and know their child will be fine in the end.

Most parents are afraid to say anything to you in case you take it out on our kid.

EEK! I know this will sound ludicrous to most teachers, but parents really do worry that teachers will seek retribution with children for mistakes they make. Guess what? Kids are afraid of the same thing! Some kids won't vent or confide their challenges in the classroom, lest parents shoot off an email that will make their next day hard.

Takeaway: let's all be adults here.

You have the power to affect my kid's life – forever. In our worst and most critical moments, parents can be convinced that

teachers have lost sight of this and they are just getting through each day. Parents fear teachers are distracted and not clued into the social scene. Parents want to be sure that teachers remember that their opinion means a lot to children, that one word of encouragement from them can mean more than a million from home, that when they do something exceptional their teachers notice. Students are watching, listening and noticing. They are impressionable. When a teacher shuts a kid down because the teacher is exhausted, or when she offers some extra guidance even though she is beat, she is leaving a legacy, for good or for not so good.

Takeaway: Teachers are powerful.

There is so much more to say, but I'll end with this: When life has thrown curve balls at my kids, teachers have played the most significant roles in their recoveries. With this in mind, I try to start each school year with an open mind about new teachers, figure out what communication style works best, say thank you for even the smallest things, and (it never hurts!) occasionally send in my husband's amazing banana bread. When I know a teacher has my kid's back, feels comfortable telling me things I don't really want to hear but need to know, I sleep better. And if you are as lucky as me, you might find that your kid's teacher becomes a lifelong friend.

Joy Libby lives, works and writes in San Francisco and is the mother of two teenagers. She occasionally blogs at joylibby.com.

Teen Mental Health with Michael Simon, MFT

By Kathleen Bisaccia

Does My Teen Have Good Mental Health? That is the question that Michael Simon, MFT, attempted to help parents answer at his presentation at the International High School on February 5, 2013. Simon approached the audience with his usual good humor but on a more serious note than in the past. The issue of teen suicide was prevalent and added a feeling of solemnity to the evening. Simon pointed out that no one (child or adult) is perfectly healthy in every way. In society a line has been crossed between helping a person to thrive and live in a

community in a healthy way and reducing every mental issue to a serialized mental health category for insurance purposes. Simon wishes we could take the former rather than latter approach to these issues.

Simon pointed out early on that good mental health is NOT the same as: getting good grades, being popular, not using drugs or alcohol, having hundreds of Facebook friends, and participating in sports or other extra-curricular activities. Many teens that present with the highest percentage of mental health issues actually have all

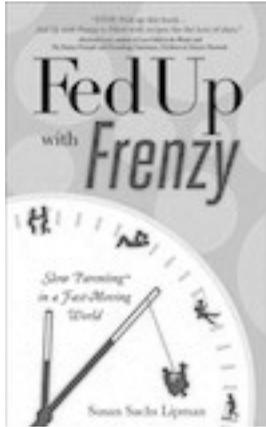
of these things in his or her life, but at the same time suffer from depression, eating disorders, and anxiety. These kids also sometimes commit suicide.

Simon also reiterated that while school can be a partner to a struggling teen, the school can't be a parent. It is up to the parents – the first responders – to watch for signs and clues. Parents can spot changes in behavior, feelings and thinking – including changes in eating, sleeping, and socialness/connection.

(continued on back cover)

9 Ways to Connect with Your Teen

By Susan Sachs Lipman



As the author of a book on Slow Parenting, parents often ask me if it's too late to connect or re-connect with their teens. The good news? It's not. If you've already established some nice routines and favorite activities, this can be a great time to continue or adjust them. Even if you don't have the connection you would like with your teenager, it's not too late to forge one.

Make some time for low-key, side-by-side sharing

The older kids get, the more they seem to respond to side-by-side (versus face-to-face) communication with parents. The pressure is lower; it can seem less interrogative and more relaxed. Try to provide activities that older kids might like to do with you, perhaps an activity they've enjoyed in the past that would still be pleasurable, like baking bread, planting seeds, doing puzzles, or tossing a football. (And, sometimes, the less planning and preamble, the better. Just present or begin an activity, and kids will likely join in.)

Sharing can also happen during a walk around the neighborhood after dinner, or at another time when it doesn't interfere with your children's increasingly busy social lives or other activities. Perhaps, take a drive somewhere pretty or unusual, to run errands, or have a meal out together. Sometimes we're afraid to re-introduce quiet activities with our older kids, when at the same time they might actually (secretly) welcome them. Our older kids often still need to talk to us. The sharing might just happen in a different way than before. We might have to be patient, provide some space, and let it unfold.

Stay up to chat on their schedules

Many older kids are energized at night, especially after coming home from a social outing. Sometimes their guard is down, too. This can be a warm time to check in, see how they're really doing, and hear about their peer group. Try to stay up to greet them when they come back into the house.

Listen more than you talk

This is a challenge for many parents. We want to lecture. We want to teach from our experience. Our kids may have a lot to tell us, but even the chattiest among them will likely clam up if we seem judgmental, or interrupt with lots of suggestions, instructions and rules. Try to resist the urge to turn their tales into "teachable moments". There is time for low-key teaching and even flat-out life-skills instruction. Driving or cooking, for instance, provide occasions to teach by demonstration, instead of more directly, and this technique might feel less threatening to some kids and make them more open to learning from you.

Get out in nature

Homework and school, college admissions, peer pressure, and social, emotional and physical changes put a lot of stress on teens. Nature can provide a temporary escape from stress and a reminder of the world's beauty and wonder. Often people feel expansive in nature and share things they might not otherwise. Even if not, time in nature together can provide a much-needed break for relaxation, contemplation or silent companionship. If

you can get your teen to completely "unplug" while in nature, all the better.

Switch it up

Maybe there are activities you didn't get around to when your kids were younger. Why not try them now? Older kids might like ice skating, going to certain museum shows, shopping for vintage clothes, or going to sports events. Have a budding photographer? Gather some peers and head to a city or other photogenic place. Have people split off in pairs or teams (allowing your older child some independence). Regroup at a pre-determined time and, later, have a fun slide show to see the different photos people took.

Have some goofy fun

Teens still want to be silly sometimes and even have fun with you. They just might not want to do it in the same way they did when they were younger. Try some things that allow them time with their peers, too. One successful activity at our house was a potato chip taste-off, during which our daughter and her friends tasted different chips and rated their favorites. The idea was a little unusual, and everyone enjoyed being a food critic. That said, some kids might find comfort in their favorite childhood games or activities, and might enjoy showing them to new friends.

Carve time to have meals together

Sometimes meal times are the only times parents and older kids get together. Even if the meal consists of a quick bite between organized activities, the time spent together is vital for retaining family togetherness. Even if they don't often result in deep discussion, mealtimes can provide time for light check-ins and bonding.

Assess the schedule

Some teens are simply too busy for their own and their family's health. Just as many opportunities for young children are not the last chance they'll have to try things, many activities for older children don't have to be pursued to the bitter end. If soccer or dance are no longer working, and are taking an inordinate amount of time or adding to the family's stress level, it may be time to drop the activity in favor of much needed down time.

Ask your teen's opinion

During the holidays, school breaks, weekends, or other times when your family enjoys down time or special traditions, ask your teens what they'd like to do. Their answers might surprise you. One friend's daughter revealed that she wanted to learn her mom's shortbread cookie recipe before she went away to college, and the two made the recipe together. Another mom asked her sons which traditions they wanted to keep enjoying, and was surprised and moved by their answers. It can be very enlightening to learn what is meaningful to your kids.

Likewise, don't be afraid to try something new together. Recently our daughter became interested in vegan cooking, so we sought out recipes and made them together. We all had a lot of fun learning new dishes and techniques and experimenting with a new way of eating. We stayed close by doing something new and fun that had meaning to our teen.

Susan Sachs Lipman is the author of "Fed Up with Frenzy: Slow Parenting in a Fast-Moving World" and the parent of a 12th grader.

Teen Mental Health with Michael Simon, MFT

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Society currently stigmatizes mental health issues and for teens who are already aware of their tenuous social status this is particularly hard. 70% of all teens who need mental health assistance do not receive it.

One thing we can do to help our teens is help them to face situations where they can both succeed and fail – and then learn how to deal with the failure. Good judgment comes from experience which comes from bad judgment. Allow your teen the time and space they need to think over a response.

Each of us is different – different biology, biography, and rate of development, so each person will handle stresses differently. But there are some signs to look for when evaluating whether a person has positive mental health. These include:

- Resilience
- Balance of dependence and independence
- The ability to love and recognize what others need
- Ability to do a complete work – e.g. cook a whole meal
- Affect management – can experience, understand, and manage emotions
- Responds well to stress
- Passion and a sense of aliveness
- Positive response to loss and failure
- Ethics and being kind to others
- Ability to attach and feel close to others
- Having a sense that you won't be abandoned, deeply hurt or neglected
- Realistic view of self and others – no-one is all good or all bad

Learn more at: www.practicalhelpforparents.com

Michael Simon's new book is "The Approximate Parent" and can be found on Amazon.com or the Approximate Parent website. <http://theapproximateparent.com>

What's the Word?

Yolo: You only live once. Said before doing something dangerous or after doing something stupid. Used to be a cool expression, now possibly is considered annoying.

Rickrolling: The prank of hiding a 1987 video of one-hit wonder Rick Astley singing "Never Gonna Give You Up" behind a seemingly interesting link.

Photo-bombing: Waiting until just before a smartphone picture is snapped and putting yourself in the picture with a goofy face.

SMH: Shaking my head. A term of admonishment.

OTP: One true pair. A match made in heaven. Can be two real people, two fictional people, a person and a favorite object, or any combination.

Shipping: Putting two people or a person and a thing together to make OTP. E.g. "I'm shipping Gary and Jen – OTP" or "I ship me and chocolate..."

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