

ADOPTION

## How to Be An Adoptive Teen Whisperer

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### How to Be an Adopted Teen Whisperer: Breakthrough keys to teen communication

The teenage years, most every parent has heard how hard they are. Other than the “terrible two’s” there is no stage as challenging for parents as the “terrible teens”. When you add to this equation the variable of adoption, then it’s no wonder there are so many teens in the foster system, being moved from home to home with no opportunity for constancy. But, does this really have to be a parent’s reality? After years of working with teens, raising my own as well as others in my group homes and therapeutic treatment homes, I’ve come to see a different reality. A reality where parents can actually feel empowered to meet the needs of their teens. In this article I will dispel the myth of the “terrible teens” and help the reader begin to develop a new understanding of their adopted teen. This will help you to understand better, listen more effectively, and cultivate a rich and meaningful relationship that will guide your teen into adulthood.

### Brain on Fire

By the time the human brain reaches five years of age it is 95% developed. Just before puberty it hits one of its final growth spurts and begins over-producing cells and synapses. Once the child reaches adolescence the brain begins to heat up and prune away all of the dendrites, cells, and synapses it has not needed up to that point. This process, literally known as “pruning” is the brain’s final stage of rapid change. This is a very critical period in a child’s life because essentially what may be occurring in their internal/external environment begins to get locked into their brain. Essentially, the pruning is another process for neural hardwiring. If a teenager is learning to play the piano, sports, or is beginning to work after school, etc. then these imprints will follow

him for the rest of his life. However, if he is a couch potato, plays video games all day, eats junk food, or does drugs etc. yet again the same imprinting will occur and follow him for the rest of his life.

Consider this compelling point: If hardwiring of activities and experiences can occur, why not the experiences of relationship? Indeed, this is exactly what happens in the adolescent brain via a special class of brain cells called “mirror neurons”. Mirror neurons are a type of brain cell that respond equally when we perform an action and when we witness someone else perform the same action. Before mirror neurons were discovered child development specialist called this process “modeling”. Perhaps you’ve heard that children learn 80% of the time through modeling. This learning occurs via mirror neurons. To a large degree we learn to respond, react, and engage with others based on the behaviors that have been modeled around us. This obviously is both good and bad news. When securing relationship with an adopted teen you must first keep in mind, the modeling that has occurred for the child prior to your involvement. This is where understanding of his personal story comes into play. Secondly, you must equally understand the modeling of your own behavior and what is being learned in the day to day interactions.

If your day to day interactions, and I’m talking about from the most obvious interactions of speaking, making eye contact, tone of voice, touch, etc. to the most subtle, your inner feelings about your child, what you are thinking in any given moment, how you are feeling about yourself as well as your child, etc. These dynamics enter into the communication with your child and ultimately contributes to the imprinting that creates the foundation for your relationship past, present, and future. Point: If you want to have a better relationship with your teen start behaving better. In our culture, we have a tendency to feel just the reverse and say, “The reason I don’t have a better relationship with my teen is because he doesn’t behave better”. Wrong message. In fact, this is the very message that underlies the struggle many parents have with their teen.

## Parents Brain on Fire

Researchers spend an ordinate amount of time focused on the child or adolescent brain, but what of the adult brain? After all, it is the adult brain that is the primary lead in the development of the child’s brain. Why do we spend so much time focused on our children’s brains? It’s as if we keep saying, “Why the little chaps brain is just all messed up. Luckily my brain is just fine or we really would be in a mess”. To be clear, this article is addressing the exact mess that we find ourselves in. Truth be told, we spend far too much time focused on trying to understand our children’s brains and not nearly enough understanding our own. There is an excellent DVD program I was involved in years ago called Trauma, Brain, and Relationship (you can watch the video below) and when I would show it to my audience I would always encourage them to try to see themselves in the conversations that the professionals were having. To hear “adult”, rather than “child”. When we can’t see ourselves, it is impossible to see our children. There is a very basic reason why we as adults struggle mightily to listen and communicate with our teens. That reason is called fear.

The amygdala which sits at the base of the brain above the brainstem is a primary emotional structure in the brain. Stress hormones originate from this structure. It is widely held that the amygdala is also where our initial fear reactions stem from. It is like an alarm system in our brains, flipping on and off all day long. The amygdala does one very simple thing that brings it to the forefront during relationships: it scans the environment looking for a threat. A threat can be experienced through any of the sensory pathways: sight, smell, touch, taste, temperature, movement, and sound. Once a threat is perceived then stress hormones are released in the brain sending a signal of survival to the rest of the brain and body. It is up to the higher level mechanisms of the brain to soothe this sudden stress outpouring.

For instance, I once took the six adolescents boys from our group home to a Halloween carnival. We had a great time. It was late coming back and all of the boys were tired and a little stressed. For some reason AJ, the oldest in the house, became the target of a couple of the other boys. They were jostling him about something. It probably had to do with his carrying a purse or wearing a wig. The banter continued until we arrived home. In AJ's escalation he screams that he is going to burn down the house and jumps out of the truck, runs around the house to the shed, and unlocks the door where the lawn mowing equipment is stored. He then commences to pour gas all the way around the house. Suspend for a moment your focus on the teenager and his behavior and imagine how you would be feeling. Close your eyes and picture the scenario. Add to the scenario that it is dark outside. It is 11 pm. You are exhausted from a long day and there is not one teenager to deal with but six. What would your amygdala be saying? In most instances, it would be screaming terror...danger...danger. In that state of sensing danger you are no longer to see the teenager as a scared child, but rather your brain reorganizes to focus on a "threat". The next communication to the brain is to eliminate the threat or at least reduce it. In other words, your brain and body go into survival. What do you do? From impulse you scream, threaten, restrain the child, in this instance he is 6'4 and weighs well over 200 pounds, or perhaps you call the police. A logical progression is that the teenager ends up in juvenile detention or equally as bad, residential treatment. Most assuredly, he is removed from the home for a lengthy period of time.

When we see a threat the only action we can take is geared towards survival. Stress research says that in times of stress our thinking becomes confused and distorted, and our short-term memory is suppressed. It doesn't say this only happens in children. In fact, the research was specific to the adult brain rather than an immature teenagers brain. Why do I say immature? The orbito-frontal cortex is the brain's executive control center for all social and emotional relationships. All relationship interactions, behaviors, and responses are ultimately regulated by this area of the brain. Unfortunately, it doesn't complete its development until we are twenty-five years old. We are constantly expecting children to behave like adults without extending them the grace of not having a fully developed brain. Sadly, this expectation begins to occur in most households by the time the child is two!

## Seek First to Understand and then to be Understood

The story of AJ was a true story. It happened one night while I was working at my group home with our six adolescent boys. A couple of the boys were harassing AJ about something and he became upset. When we pulled up to the home he jumped out and declared, "I'll show you. You wanna mess with me. I'll burn the whole house down!" He did grab the gas can and begin to pour it around the house. The other boys became really upset as I watched him do it. They couldn't predict my behavior because I wasn't rushing into action. Finally after a few seconds passed I just walked over to AJ, grabbed the gas can as one would take something from a two year old. There was no struggle or major drama. In a very strong tone of voice I said, "What's wrong with you! Don't you know if your social worker saw you doing this you'd be sent off to residential treatment!" *(Notice here my use of the exclamation. I was not stating these two things as questions but rather I was exclaiming. Of course I know what's wrong with him and of course I know that he wasn't thinking about his social worker. My use of these expressions was to connect in both a non-threatening way, but also in a protective way. I wasn't saying he was bad but rather that as an eighteen year old he is putting himself at risk and I am concerned primarily with that.)* AJ stood and looked at me shamefully as I walked to the back of the shed and put away the gas can.

However, the other boys were still escalated and one of them, the more aggressive one in the home, went diving into AJ and they both landed on the ground in a tussle. Remember AJ is 6'4, his attacker was 5'6, it was actually rather comical to see them both struggling on the ground like two angry five year olds. Literally it had that level of intensity to it. It was so non-threatening to my amygdala that I watched them for a few seconds before walking over and pulling the little guy off of the big guy. At this point it was my responsibility to contain the group so in an elevated voice I said, "It is not okay for you to put your hands on anyone. I can handle this situation just fine." To which point he yelled, "Well it doesn't look like you are handling anything. You're just gonna let him burn down the house and then where are we gonna live?" I yelled back, "You have to trust that I can take care of you. I'm not gonna let anything happen to you or this house." And then it was over. About ten minutes later we were all inside getting ready for bed. No restraints, no police, no residential treatment. *(Why did I yell? It's called matching affect. Similar to when there is a rowdy crowd and one person is able to breakthrough the commotion because of the pitch and intensity of their voice. Sometimes when children are escalated you have to be able to match their affect in order to create the necessary environment of emotional containment.)*

The key to listening so that your teenager will feel heard, is to engage in communication without judgment. This requires you as the parent to listen while regulating your own fear reaction. Teenagers give us lots of opportunity to feel frightened, but keep in mind, if you are listening to your teen then truly in that moment there is no risk. Even if he says to you, "I'm gonna go do drugs or even I'm gonna kill myself," in that moment he actually not doing either. In that moment is when you have the greatest opportunity to influence your child. Express your love first by listening. After listening, validate again without judgment. Is it really that difficult to understand where your teen is coming from?

Think back to when you were a teen. How many times did you feel helpless, alone, scared, or depressed? These are naturally feelings especially when one's brain is going through tremendous change. Validate by saying, "I understand", "That must really suck" or "I'm really sorry I didn't know you were feeling that way". Statements such as this communicate non-judgmental acceptance and understanding. This is critical. Remember, your teen is already stressed. His brain is looking for a threat.

Finally, communicate so he will listen by suspending fear-based judgments and threats that will only weaken the relationship further. Any negative statements at this point are not going to be helpful. In fact, it is only our fear and stress that make us say negative things. What if you were not afraid? You wouldn't need to be negative. You only say negative things when you feel, from a place of fear, that you can control a situation or make a potential threat disappear. With sensitive teens it is best to say little and feel loving. Oftentimes just being present, literally sitting in a vicinity of the teen without need to talk, can be more powerful than saying anything. Other times, when the need to communicate is imperative give yourself time to settle into a quiet internal place before you express yourself. Once expressing yourself, here is a very important key to effective teen whispering: Do not be moved by the reaction you receive from your teen. Whether it's a yell, curse word, defiant gesture, or threat. Simply say, "I completely understand how you might feel that way and if I could make your upset feelings go away I would. You are entitled to feel as upset as you need to." By expressing in this manner you are removing yourself as a target of threat to your teen. When you remove yourself as the threat then not only does it help to de-escalate the situation but it provides the quickest pathway toward helping your teens thinking and memory normalize.

Raising teens is not easy but it also doesn't have to be overwhelming and destructive. Stay connected to your own internal reactions of fear and stress. Doing this will put you in a stronger brain/body based state to reach your teen more effectively.

Bryan Post is the founder of [www.postinstitute.com](http://www.postinstitute.com). His work has influenced healing in the lives of thousands of adoptive families over the years.

### **Key Points in Summary**

1. Behave like a better parent
2. Engage in communication without judgment – no matter what you think or feel. Remember that re-acting is just that – doing again what you did before. Be open to something new, like unconditional love.
3. Suspend fear-based judgments and threats
4. Sometimes just being with, rather than saying something can be more healing, calming and loving
5. If you say anything, let it come from care and concern – an honesty about how you feel/felt and above all – what would love do now?

Choose Love, B