



Michael Bradley, PhD Field-Tested Strategies for Parenting Adolescents

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Michael Bradley, PhD, is a licensed clinical psychologist with a doctoral degree in psychology from Temple University. His award winning books have received ten national publishing awards. He is also a recipient of the prestigious William Penn Humanitarian Award, Commission on Human Relations. More information about Dr. Michael Bradley may be found at www.docmikebradley.com

On the baseball metaphor: Raising children up to adolescence is like the “regular season” – lots of fun games, low risk. The teen years are like the play offs – the players are bigger, faster, stronger, and the stakes feel much higher; with one wrong move the season may be over.

On redefining the mission: Dr. Bradley’s goal is not to help us control our kids; his goal is to help us TEACH OUR CHILDREN TO CONTROL THEMSELVES. This mission will require a different set of strategies and tactics than come naturally to us.

Part 1: Teenage brains are undergoing reconstruction

When this is understood you will appropriately see your children not as smaller adults but as large children. Your previously “perfect” child went “nuts” at adolescence when his brain began to be rewired. The renovation starts at the back of the brain and moves forward. The back of the brain, where social and emotional impulses originate, matures first. The last part to change is the prefrontal cortex, which is necessary for judgment and the ability to do a “committee review.”

On gender differences: Girls’ brains begin reconstruction around 11-13 yrs. Boys’ brains begin changing 18-24 months later. Comparing girls and boys in the 6th grade: girls are focused and taking notes, while boys are making rude body noises. Studies show that boys’ brains do not finish reconstruction until around age 25. But which gender is harder to raise? 90-95% of parents say that girls are harder to raise – they are

smarter, more complex, push adults' buttons. Mothers and daughters in particular have a special dynamic; they can be very close but also drive each other crazy. Dr. Bradley's advice to dads: let them figure it out, don't take sides!

On signs of the onset of brain renovation:

- Parents "lose the ball" and any semblance of "cool" overnight.
- Moodiness. Boys become passive and dark, enter their "cave", stop communicating with parents. Girls explode in storms, complaining "There's nothing to eat!" Girls can seem "bipolar" with their ups and downs, but this is normal female adolescence.
- Impulsivity: Teenage boys and girls will say and do things that will astound themselves even more than you. The least productive question to ask is "What were you thinking?" The kids honestly don't know. Their brains have no wires to the "committee" for impulse control. Kids today are also impulsively verbal, and feel comfortable expressing rage (compared to past generations); this is actually good for our kids (though hard on the parents).
- Ability to process emotion slows down 25%. Their brains bog down like a computer with a virus. Unfortunately, teenage brains misread adult expressions of fear and concern as anger/rejection/criticism/judgment – "You're always yelling at me."

On stress, the teenage brain, and the ability to learn: If a teenager is stressed, his brain cannot learn. Under stress, his/her learning centers slow down, and only the fight/flight sections of the brain are active. IF YOU STRESS THE TEENAGE BRAIN, YOU'RE GIVING UP THE OPPORTUNITY TO TEACH. Stressors include hitting, yelling, sarcasm, crying. You must be DISPASSIONATE (see Commandment 1 of Dr. Bradley's Ten Commandments of Parenting).

On staying up all night and teen sleep needs: Teens are inclined to stay up late, due to evolutionary pressures. Adolescent animals in the wild have the best sight and hearing so they typically stay up all night to protect the pack and then sleep all day. Teens need at least 10 hours of sleep (studies show 10-12), but the average teen sleeps only 5.7 hours. Basically their required sleep has been cut in half, resulting in increased depression, anxiety, ADHD symptoms, difficulty with regulating mood and impulse control. Many teenage diagnoses are actually sleep deprivation. Parents should imagine how they would function with half of their required sleep. Book recommendation: Spark: the Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain – on exercise, brain function, how exercise outperforms medication.

Part 2: The world teenagers live in is CRAZY

We don't know what's out there for our teenagers; it's completely different from what we experienced. This is our opportunity to ask our kids "Tell me about your world" vs. assuming we know everything about everything. Show respect for their culture/experience – it will bring you closer.

On crazy cultural prompts: Teens are pummeled, barraged by song lyrics, music video scenes, messages about sex, drugs, violence - much more so than previous generations. Do these prompts affect teen behavior? YES! Studies show that exposure

to smoking on TV leads to a much higher rate of smoking initiation. Girls who listen to music with sexual, misogynistic lyrics have a much earlier onset of sexual activity and higher risk multiple partner activity.

On what has changed, trends:

- Age of onset – exposure to porn, drugs, sex. Average age of exposure to hardcore pornography is age 10. 32% of boys watch at least once/week. We are immigrants to technology – they are natives – so it's impossible to control their exposure.
- The sheer number of risky behaviors has increased dramatically. Contrary to what some surveys report, kids are doing as much if not more of these risky behaviors as ever before. Kids underestimate their behaviors; in these surveys kids are asked to self-report (!). More objective studies reveal these surveys are not accurate.
- The concentration of behaviors has increased. Tremendous amounts of drugs and alcohol.
- Suicide has exploded among teenagers – up 500%. Last year 1 in 4 teenagers suffered from clinical depression. Dr. Bradley described it as a war zone – the combination of the brain changes and a world which lures our teens towards risky behaviors.

On typical parent responses: Effective parent intervention is difficult because we're fighting this war with the rules of the last one, focusing on trying to control our kids' environment.

- We're sad/mad because we've "lost" our children. We were used to having hugs of complete acceptance, of being admired, smart, "cool" and athletic in their eyes, and then suddenly our teenager stops taking care of us and our needs. Their growing up leaves a wound. Parents must go through a grief process, and be careful not to pull away in sadness or anger just at the time when they need us most. According to Dr. Bradley, our last 5 years with our kids at home may be more important than our first 5 years.
- We're confused. What to do? Our kids went from being smart, adorable "puppies" to teens who now challenge everything we say, reject our religious traditions, etc. Some of us may have memories of how our own parents controlled us – with yelling, hitting or policing our environment. Society has largely taken away the tool of fear/corporal punishment but has not replaced it with anything else. We can no longer police or control a child's environment while their brain finishes wiring. The concept of using fear and punishments, or FEAR-BASED parenting, no longer works, and never worked well in the first place. Dr. Bradley told the story of his own father breaking his Doors album, because he didn't like the lyrics. At that time, breaking the album ended the influence. Today, of course, that wouldn't work – kids would just download the songs again, and more of them, in a few seconds. A better way is what Dr. Bradley calls RESPECT-BASED parenting.

Part 3: Respect-based Parenting

While FEAR-BASED parenting humiliates, enrages, and embarrasses, RESPECT-BASED parenting says "I CARE ABOUT WHAT YOU THINK." You can't control what

they see and hear, but you can try to affect what they THINK about what they see and hear. Don't go after the culture, GO AFTER THEIR BELIEFS. The safe kid is the one who has been thoughtful about what the culture is saying.

Kids do not respect:

1. Reactive parents who yell and hit
2. Hypocrites
3. "Cool" parents who provide alcohol

What parents can do:

1. Respect their kids. Do not yell or hit, or be sure to apologize when you do. Apologies are a great teaching tool – kids see you wrestling with your own imperfection, striving to be better – and the kids will respect your honesty and feel loved.
2. Keep connecting, keep selling, stay available. Be willing to keep going into their rooms to "take the beating" or the rejection. Keep offering hugs. Don't accept their stoniness. You need the connection to be able to share your values.
3. Find creative ways to knock down doors. Wave a white flag, make a fool of yourself, "take a knee" for the relationship. Dr. Bradley offered his teenage son \$5 to have coffee with him. His wife brought two fully loaded water guns to their daughter and went at it, breaking the ice.
4. Stop fighting conflict. Parents are often afraid of conflict, but conflict in the proper dose actually feels like love to a teen. Teens are not stupid, they're just "crazy" and mad. When parents say "We love you too much to let you take that risk", she'll be mad but also feel loved.

Wrap-up:

1. Know that the dark days will pass (see commandment 10 of Dr. Bradley's 10 Commandments of Parenting). Stop getting freaked that you have problems with your kid. Welcome problems – these are their life lessons, their bootcamp for life. The "perfect kid" is actually much scarier.
2. Pick your battles:
 - a. Yellow Battles – clothing disagreements, messy rooms
 - b. Orange Battles – grades. Be very careful – there is an inverse correlation between pressure for academic achievement and eventual success/happiness. There's a safety net for poor grades – community college and transfer – but no safety net for a broken relationship.
 - c. Red battles – sex, drugs, violence. NEVER NEGOTIATE ON THESE.
3. It's not your job to get your kid into a top 10 college; rather, your job is to raise the parents of your grandchildren.