

The New York Times

Motherlode

Adventures in Parenting

OCTOBER 12, 2010, 10:41 AM

The Blessings of a B-Minus

By LISA BELKIN

“Little kids, little problems,” the Russian version of the proverb says.

In Italian, it’s “Little children, headache; big children, heartache.”

And in Yiddish: “Small children disturb your sleep, big children disturb your life.”

In her new book “The Blessing of a B Minus: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Resilient Teenagers,” psychologist Wendy Mogel acknowledges that parents have more reason to worry as their children grow:

The main difference between raising small children and teenagers is the danger involved, both perceived and real. There’s a difference between teaching your child to ride a two-wheeler and teaching her to drive a car. Between worrying that she will eat too much sugar at a birthday party and fearing that she might take Ecstasy at a rave. Between your disappointment that he wasn’t placed in the top second-grade reading group and worrying that he won’t make it into college.

But, she warns, the fact that the dangers are scarier does not change the fact that facing them down is what allows a teen to become a healthy adult. Mogel’s first book, “Blessings of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children,” sent the message that bumps and bruises (both the literal and the metaphorical kinds) are part of how children learn to be pick themselves up and move on. In this new book, her goal is to assure us that everything alarming about older children — their lack of motivation, their bursts of anger or surliness, their tendency to treat us like an A.T.M., their recklessness, their rudeness — are exactly the things they must do in order to become responsible, resilient adults.

As she explained in an interview:

...rudeness... is a sign that your teen is working to separate from those she trusts the most. So see it as a chance to teach tolerance and respect. What looks like runaway materialism is a chance to teach the virtue of moderation. And it’s also a blessing for parents to live with these creatures who have such a lusty capacity for delight, who vibrate with the perfection of the universe when they find the perfectly perfect pair of skinny jeans.

I’m guessing that most of you don’t see your child’s insistence on buying and spending, or

grunting and snapping, as “blessings.” I suspect that you see these as signs that you have failed. Most parents take the ups and downs of teenagers personally, Mogel says, and the result is a cycle that might well be familiar to you:

Well-intentioned parents perceive the world as so competitive and dangerous — there are only 10 good colleges, the drugs are stronger, sex more dangerous — that they wish for their child to go straight from sweet third grader to junior statesman. They hope that with the right strategy their child can skip the stage of adolescence — of risk-taking, bad choices, oversleeping and sketchy friends — entirely.

So they get very involved and become very helpful on one hand and become overly reactive and suspicious on the other. Normal teen ups and downs seem like tsunamis. And here’s the outcome: instead of typical teen moodiness, arrogance and annoyance-with-parents these overhandled, overstressed kids feel anxious, demoralized and helpless, and some become very angry. Instead of taking it out on their parents — who already seem so vulnerable — they take it out on themselves in the form of eating disorders, self-injury, homework strikes and anxiety and gloominess about the future.

Then when these teens get to college they are unprepared to manage without their handlers. The deans call those who have been overprotected “teacups” and those who have been fried from overscheduling and overwork “crispiers.” Some get into top schools but come home before the end of first semester.

In other words, she believes, it is the overreaction to adolescence, rather than the actual dangers of adolescence that threatens our kids. Her book is filled with reassurance, much of it summed up into spoonful-sized statements, like:

- 1 . Teenagers need to make dumb mistakes to get smart.
- 2 . Be ALERT but not ALARMED.
- 3 . Be compassionate and concerned but not enmeshed.
- 4 . Love them but do not worship them like idols or despise them when they let you down.
- 5 . Be observant without spying or prying.
- 6 . Pretend you have seven kids: Dopey, Bashful, Sleepy, Grumpy, Doc (the “know it all”), Sneezzy (Does he have a learning disability? An undiagnosed handicap of some kind?), Happy (Is he too laid back? Where is his passion, focus, ambition and drive?) and that which ever of these seven appear in your child’s form on any given day, they are all just going through a phase
- 7 . When they come to you in distress, resist responding like a concierge, talent agent or the secret police. Assume that they are capable of figuring out — through trial and error — how to solve their own problems.
- 8 . Be forewarned that the college Common Application asks about “paid”

employment with the word “paid” in bold. Remind yourself that ordinary chores and nonfancy paid jobs provide a great education in ordinary but vital life skills.

9 . Remind yourself that watching dumb YouTube videos is a healthful form of decompression and entertainment for teenagers.

10 .Remind yourself that they are unlikely to fulfill all of your dreams or all of your nightmares.

11. Remember that a snapshot of your teenager today is not the epic movie of her life.

12. Recognize that once they get to college, FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) laws don’t allow parents to see their child’s grades so it’s a good idea for students to learn the relationship between effort and outcome long before they go.

13. Plan parental obsolescence, raise them to leave you. The Talmud requires that parents teach their child how to swim.

14. Put the oxygen mask on yourself before you put it on your child.

15. Find support in other adults instead of letting shame or fear about your teenager’s twisting path cause you to isolate yourself.

She dubs her philosophy “compassionate detachment,” defined as “viewing the upsetting aspects of adolescence as normal and necessary — as blessings that represent healthy growth, parents can put them in perspective and react thoughtfully instead of impulsively. Thus, bad grades, emotional outbursts, rudeness, breaking the rules, staying up late and experimentation become signs that a teen is on course, not headed for disaster.”

A blessing indeed.