

Can You See Me?: The Teenage Search for Significance, Identity and Self Worth | Sharon Morris May, Ph.D.

Introduction: The big questions teens ask is: "Who am I?", "Am I valuable?", "What am I good at?", "How can I build positive relationships?", "Where do I belong?" "What will my life look like?", "Am I worthwhile?" Teenagers are searching for the reality of Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

I. Defining significance, self worth, and identity:

- A. Significance = "quality of having importance, worth, or being regarded as meaningful, not accidental or random
- B. Self-worth = "the confidence and personal value and worth as an individual: self-respect
- C. Identity = "set of characteristics that somebody recognizes belonging uniquely to him or herself.

II. The importance of connectedness

- A. Teenagers discover who they are not in the isolation of independence, but rather in the emotional safety of interdependence in community. God has designed this coming into being in a safe community.
- B. It is out of their key, significant and fundamental attachments that so much of their identity is formed.
- C. In these relationships teenagers have the opportunity to:
 - 1. Explore who they are & gain a sense of themselves
 - 2. Be guided, molded & shaped
 - 3. Have reflected to them: Who they are, their significance, and worth...and their identity. As this is reflected back on them...it becomes internalized.

III. At 14 – 15 years of age, a teen enters a new developmental stage. One that does intensity for:

- A. Need for autonomy "Who am I? What do I think?"
- B. Know they are significant
- C. While still belonging to and connected to family: This journey comes with turbulence, pain, conflict, negativity, arguing, and general disruption for both parent and teenager

IV. The various ways teens deal with their journey of becoming:

- A. You are not the boss of me - 'I'll do the opposite of what my parents say because I feel controlled by them'
- B. Lost teens: 'I'll explore aimlessly, experimenting where I can, because I have no one to direct me'
- C. I'll do anything to fit teens: 'I want to fit-in and belong and if I act this way and participate in these activities then I will'

V. Teenagers need 6 key experiences as they explore their identity, worth and significance. Teens need to know:

- A. They are becoming their own person
- B. They are valued
- C. They are uniquely gifted & talented
- D. They belong
- E. They are not alone in their journey
- F. They will be guided

- VI. What environment does a teen need to discover their significance, worth and identity?** At home, we create a safe haven for our teenagers in which they can blossom and grow and go on this journey of self-discovery
- A. The new research on self esteem is primarily about maturing so to 'do well in life'
 - B. This 'maturity' and 'self discovery' is best done in the shelter of a safe haven family, a supportive church community, school, social network and friends.
 - C. The teenage years are in essence asking parents, churches, schools and communities: "Can you create a safe place for me so I can blossom and have a safe place to grow, discover who I am and find the path I am to walk on into my future?"

- VII. There are 6 key elements that foster a safe haven within the home where a teen can venture on the journey to 'become':**
- A. These elements are 'ways of being' with a teenager
 - B. The interactions a teenager has with his/her parents & significant relationships are internalized and become 'internal working models that become the principles that organize a teenager's inner world and life
 - C. The ways of being with your teen that are of vital importance to your teen's development are:
 1. PROXIMITY – allow your teen to determine how 'physically close' is comfortable
 2. VALUE – reflect back to your teen 'I see you and you are of great value'
 3. TRUST – you will be reliable and emotional trustworthy - 'you will care for my needs and you won't go off on me, shut me out'
 - a. Be dependable
 - b. Be predictable

- VIII. Common emotional reactions to a teen's experience:**
- A. Denial: "You don't want to do baseball; you are so good at baseball."
 - B. Philosophical response: "Well, that's just life – sometimes you get what you want, other times you don't"
 - C. Defense of the other people involved: "Well, if you weren't always late to class then your teacher wouldn't always be picking on you"
 - D. Something is wrong with you: "Just let your brother be, you have no patience do you? You are just like your father, always having to be so controlling." Parents well-meaning attempts to shape their teenagers thoughts and actions often causes parents to dismiss their teenagers fears, frustrations, preferences and ideas as though they don't count.
 - E. Teens end up feeling:
 1. Parents/adults are jerks who don't understand, are unreasonable & out of control "Leave me alone" "I hate you" "I so want out of this family"
 2. Parents/adults are boring, not relevant, clueless to the real world & their warnings need not be heeded. "Who even cares?" "I'll just sneak around & do it anyway" "They are so wrong, nothing bad will happen, I will do what I want"
 3. I am a bad person; life is to be feared, fought with or avoided: "Why try? Nothing I do is good enough" "I'll never grow up to be anything ... I don't care about life anymore" "I am such a failure"
 4. No one understands me: I should break loose, get out of here, and do what I want, go where I belong "I am lost" "I'll prove them wrong" "I'll do the opposite of what they say" "I will just not feel, go through the motions until I get out of here"

IX. Emotional and physical availability – ‘You’ll be there for me’ Daniel Stern says ...“Emotional availability of a caregiver is the crucial factor in determining the makeup of internal working models. ...How the parent ‘is with’ the teen is more important than what the parent does.

- A. Ways to be emotionally available and accessible
 - 1. Make yourself emotionally available – set aside time to be fully present, just hang out, be there, no agenda
 - 2. Frequent eye contact, facial response when you talk
 - 3. Listen in an understanding way
 - a. Reflect back what I think they are saying
 - b. Not defensive nor shut down when they say something I disagree with
 - c. Not overreacting or taking harsh action when they risk to share
 - 4. Be there – share your world with your teen and get to know your teen’s world
 - a. Builds self awareness & self esteem in the context of ‘us’
 - b. Monitor their activities
 - c. Get to know your teen
- B. Gottman’s 4 family styles in regards to how emotions are dealt with
 - 1. Dismissive Parent: “Parents who disregard, ignore, or trivialize their teenager’s negative emotions”
 - 2. Disapproving Parent: “Critical of their teenagers displays of negative emotions and will scold and discipline the teen when they express them”
 - 3. Accommodating parents: “Accept their children’s emotions & empathize with them, but don’t give guidance on what the teenager can do with the emotion, nor do they set limits on their teenager’s behavior when reacting out of the emotion”
 - 4. Emotional safe haven parents: “Guides emotions - accepts the teenagers experience and helps guide the teenager to understand their emotions and how to react appropriately out of their emotions”
- C. Accurate attunement: Be attuned to a teen’s emotions, and reflect them accurately so they feel ‘seen’ like ‘Wow, you really ‘get’ me’
 - 1. Respond in a manner that lets the teen know you are attuned to their experience, respect them even though you don’t agree with them. This involves:
 - a. I sense what you are feeling & saying – I read your ‘signals’
 - b. I have taken in your experience – processed it & understand your view
 - c. I then respond in a manner that reflects:
 - i. What you are feeling & experiencing
 - ii. What I know about you
 - 2. When your teen is in a moment of need, they will be most sensitive to mis-attunement
 - 3. Mis-attunement: When your response does not match their inner experience but rather reflects something about you rather than about your teenager’s experience
 - 4. Listening, asking questions, and being emotionally attuned to cues your teen expresses will help you stay emotionally attuned to your teen

X. Responsiveness

- A. ‘You will respond with my best interest in mind’
- B. You will also help me understand and decide “How am I supposed to act?” The ways we react to our kids has opportunity to create a deep sense of feeling connected & understood.

XI. Respond: Sensitive, caring, with loving boundaries & constructive discipline, tender treatment kids need; love with directions/guidelines

- A. Respond in a manner that shows value & worth "Children need to be enjoyed & valued, not managed" Daniel Siegel. We are too busy doing things for our kids: working for, picking up after, taking care of and we fail to pause and delight in the opportunities to be with our children
- B. Understand our own & our teens strong emotional reactions
- C. Respond after sifting through our strong emotional reactions
 - 1. Response flexibility - Daniel Siegel in his book "Developing Mind" defines it as: "Ability of our mind to sort through a wide variety of mental processes, such as impulses, ideas, and feelings, and, come up with a thoughtful, non-automatic response."

XII. Reconnecting after disruptions

- A. A teen needs to know: "After I have done something wrong, there will be away to make amends and to re-connect, restore our relationship"
- B. When a parent gets mad at a teen, the teen needs to have the time to process and make sense of what happened. And then find a way of making things okay again. Like God promised His people over the generations: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt." Jeremiah 31: 3, 4
- C. A teen also needs: Guidance
 - 1. 'You'll help me become me'
 - 2. 'You'll help me make sense of life and my emotions'
 - 3. 'Help me decide what to believe in, what plumb-line I will use to center my life, the North Star that will guide me' Just as God says to us, Psalm 25:4,5 "Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior and my hope is in you all day long."
 - 4. Help your teen 'think' versus demanding certain behaviors
 - a. Parents get caught up in focusing on controlling their teen's behavior and opinions because they believe if they control what their child thinks it will lead to obedience.
 - b. Parents use guilt, withdraw their attention, belittle, and dismiss their teen's feelings and experiences
 - c. Help your teen make sense of their world and experiences by:
 - i. Listen: Respectfully consider your teen's perspective
 - ii. Explain: Offer alternate explanations or interpretations of events
 - iii. Be respectful: Don't be dismissive, be disrespectful or take the tone of 'You are wrong, so immature to think that way'

XIII. The ways parents & teens attach: Attachment styles

- A. Avoidant – emotionally unavailable; uncomfortable with closeness & experiences; mistrust people's attention. Because they have lived with a lot of rejection.
- B. Controlling anxious parent – hyper-vigilant; don't allow the children to have their own life or experiences. Teens tend to be anxious themselves; scared, unsure of themselves. Can they be good enough? Lack identity and feel lost. They often push away to find their sense of being.
- C. Fragile anxious parent – overwhelmed "oh I can't believe that you got in trouble in school". They don't know what to do...overlook behaviors; fear of their children. Teens don't know how to make sense of their emotions. They live life with unpredictableness. They avoid conflict and sneak around.

XIV. Conclusion

- A. A recent PBS special on the teen brain that I think sums it all up:
 - 1. Despite all the new scientific research, experts say that the most beneficial thing for a teenager's development is good relationships with their parents.
 - 2. "It's the relationships, it's the connections, it's the people in children's lives who make the biggest difference."
- B. It is in the shelter of your relationship, that your teenager will grow and blossom. They will discover who they are, their strengths, worth, and how to be & interact in the world around them.
"When parents understand how attachment affects development and how their communication and behavior affects their child's ability to have a secure attachment to them....they are often motivated to change" Daniel Siegel