

Staying Connected

By Stephen R. Andrew, LCSW, LADC, CGP

Based on all the research about prevention of alcohol and other drug misuse and abuse, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and violence, the critical ingredient that seems to be the most important to adolescents is a connection to their family, friends, and community. We know that when a young person grows up in a place where he gets plenty of affection, limits, and latitude, he or she is able to have the capacity to negotiate the intense emotional period of adolescence. When young people have been hurt or wounded in any way their need for power and control, which is part of their normal adolescent development, increases. Their ability to negotiate with adults, who are generally seen as people who take away their power and control, becomes more and more difficult when a child has been hurt or disconnected as part of their developmental process.

There are plenty of studies about resiliency and the ability to bounce back from things that happen in life. Young people who can bounce back and generally can negotiate their anxiety are able to self-soothe themselves; they discover an ability to quiet their inner anxiety and are able to negotiate when they feel tense. They can separate their emotions from their behaviors. They understand the language of emotions and are not afraid to step into new environments and new situations. They have the power to initiate hopes and dreams. But most of all young people who are resilient and bounce back are able to help others, primarily other peers. They are actively involved in being a part of caring for their other friends, sometimes a sibling, or maybe a family member.

One of the most important things we now know about adolescents who are able to bounce back is that this kind of young person can be both masculine and feminine, is able to be emotional, can connect through emotions, and at the same time is able to be their *powerful* self. This is a person who can be strongly independent and yet who knows the ability to be interdependent, part of a team, or connected to others. These skills are acquired in the young person by having them understand the dynamics of their lives and by giving them places to talk about those issues where they are witnessed and empathized with about their developmental process, their hurts and wounds, their difficulties and tragedies.

It is this sharing and witnessing without judgement that seems to be so critical in the conversations. In years now of asking young people who are the kinds of people they feel most connected to they talk about this quality of person who can listen to them deeply, who knows them and has empathy for the specifics in their lives and at the same time challenges them through a sense of humor, through gentle nudging to *go for it*, to follow their dreams and hopes, who encourages them by listening to what those hopes and dreams are. It is in the quality of the listening and the quality of the conversation that is so vital. When a young person does not feel heard, when a young person feels controlled, when they feel that they can not develop a collaborative relationship with an adult, they tend to enter into some kind of either passive or aggressive power struggle. These reasons can be substance use, acting out by committing a crime, acting out sexually, any kind of

violating of the rules created by the people they don't respect. Respect is earned by the development of a collaborative relationship with an adult, a parent, and the young person within boundaries that are safe. It is the trusting parts of the relationship, at the same time creating clear boundaries based on decisions that they cannot make because of health and safety. It is not the boundaries and limits that are the essential items, but, in fact, the *conversation*, the dialogue, the ability to *have* the dialogue about the boundaries. It is about acknowledging the emotions of the young person, it is the empathy of the anxiety, of the fears, of the anger, of the shame...

Most young people desperately have a yearning that is deeper than what we can remember in ourselves. It is this deepness with which they want to connect to each other and with an adult such as a teacher, a coach, a parent, a grandparent, a member of the community. They want, at the same time, to find a place where they belong, to have a sense of connectedness. They want to find a place where they can do something they are capable of, where their hidden gifts are revealed, and the lights of the community are on them, with people watching them who can see their gifts as they unfold and who can acknowledge their talents and skills.

And finally, young people want to be responsible for caring for another. These primary yearnings are deep and fluctuate fast and quickly in the young person's heart, emotions, body, and mind. Without places to speak to it, especially without places to speak to adults who will listen in those safe places, young people will discuss the same material by using drugs or cigarettes for the first time or having sex or committing a crime. The conversation will be among their peers. Please remember that young people gravitate to the same level of self worth—most of their friends have the same self-worth as they do. So if they have what one might consider low self-worth, their friends will have low self worth and if they have no place to discuss the issues in their lives, then they will discuss it with each other and each other will promote whatever gives them power and sovereignty over their lives—and please believe me the drugs give power to a young person's life!

If you are a worker, working with a young person, the most important steps you can take are to

1. express empathy
2. roll with resistance
3. avoid arguments
4. amplify any ambivalence between two parts (one part might be "I want to quit using and be a part of my community or my school", the other part might be "I want to be a part of my friends for I want to feel good or I want to do drugs." See the two parts, the duality.
5. see the strengths of the young person and hold those up with *affection*. Hear their concerns, hopes and dreams, their aspirations.

If you are the parent of the young person, encourage conversation. Set boundaries around health and safety—be very clear about them. Listen, and spend time with them. Time is about the most important thing you can give in a young person's life. Even when they

don't want to spend time with you, make sure you are still *around* them. If you can't be around them, get around the adults that are around your child, listen to how they perceive your child. It is true that a "village brings up a child", especially in adolescence. If you feel you can't connect with your child or the young person in your life, seek help! Seek help to mediate. Get help to get the conversation started. *Staying connected* is the most important ingredient in prevention of substance abuse, sexual misuse, teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, and many other social issues we struggle with as part of our community.

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