

chapter  
6

## YOUR PARENTS

Who Are They, and What  
Are They Trying to DO??

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*“Son, could you let me finish one sentence  
before you start to contradict me?” —Arnold, age 43*

**I** have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that your parents will have more impact on shaping who you will become than any other influence in your life.

The bad news is that *your parents will have more impact on shaping who you become than any other influence in your life.*

For many kids, that news is OK, because their parents are OK. They have a set of values, they don't do crazy things, and they put their kids' needs first. They are “adults who are grown-ups,” as kids describe them.

But for kids like Dylan, that news is not OK. His parents are adults, but not much else.

Dylan had an incredible mind for a 15-year-old. If he could ever beat his weed habit, he had a shot at doing anything he wanted, which for now was to be a video producer. In fact, he had an idea for a TV spot that I thought was so good that I suggested he submit it.

“I’m, like, sick to death of these public-service antidrug ads. You know, the ones that tell these loving, concerned parents about bugging your insane kid not to do drugs? My ad would be a little different.

“All the scenes would show just the bodies of people who are talking—no faces, but you can hear the voices. It opens with a principal and a cop sitting at a table with a kid, and the principal is on a phone with the kid’s mother, and he’s saying, ‘Mrs. Jones, can you come down to school immediately? I’m afraid your son has a drug problem.’ The screen cuts to Mom at home holding a cell phone, talking to the principal. As she stubs out a cigarette in an overflowing ashtray, she knocks over a beer bottle in a group of empties. With a slurred voice, she says, ‘Dylan? Drugs? I can’t believe that.’

“Then Mom calls Dad on his cell. His phone rings on his car seat next to a bag of pot. He picks the phone up, and you see a cloud of smoke as he exhales. With a weed-tight voice, he says, ‘No way! Dylan? Drugs? That’s nuts! I’ll meet you there. I’m sure it’s a mistake.’

“The final scene shows the first table, as everyone turns towards the door as it opens. The principal says, ‘Mr. and Mrs. Jones, thanks so much for. . . .’ He pauses, as the camera moves up to show the glassy eyes on both parents. ‘Uh, Dylan,’ the principal says, ‘you can go now. I think I need to speak with your parents—alone.’ The scene closes with a written message on the screen. It says, ‘Want drug-free kids? YOU FIRST!’

Dylan’s video was pretty much a scene from his own life.

Dylan would be upset to learn that his parents are the most powerful influence in his life. He made me think of my son’s tee shirt. On the back, it reads “You can pick your friends, and you can pick your nose, but you can’t pick your friend’s nose.” On the front, it reads “You can pick your nose, but you can’t pick your parents.” That front message is pretty scary when you look at all the research that shows that your parents have more impact on shaping your identity than any other part of your world. This means that blind luck selects this most powerful influence on your adolescent life.

The secret to handling this influence well is to see your parents’ lives as menus of sorts, as collections of ideas about how you might want to

live your own life. Some of their ideas will be excellent. Others may be terrible. But if you can see your parents more objectively as people, human beings with good and bad points, strengths and weaknesses, you'll do a much better job of sorting out what you want to copy, from what you want to cut.

Living your teen years without seeing your folks as human beings sets up an endless fight between those nonhuman creatures known as *parents* and *teens*. The odd thing is that, as different as those things are, they can also be almost the same.

### Parents and Teens: The "Mirror Wars"

Parents are people. I know you know that—sort of. But one of the curious things about being someone's child is that you grow up seeing your folks not as *people*, but as *parents*, which are entirely different creatures, at least to kids.

Teenagers are people. I know your parents know that—sort of. But one of the curious things about being someone's parent is that you grow older seeing your kid not as a *person*, but as a *teenager*, which is an entirely different creature, at least to parents.

A person is a being with feelings, thoughts, good points, bad points, dreams, fears, hopes—you know, like a *person*. That is someone you usually respect, talk nicely to, listen to, and generally get along with. For the most part, a *person* seems rational and logical,

and doesn't make you crazy when he or she says or does slightly annoying things. You forgive or overlook a lot with a *person*.

*When we start labeling people, we stop seeing them as human beings.*

I know this, because both the teens *and* parents I work with treat me like I'm a person. That's very nice. But too often, they

don't see each other as people. That's very sad. That's what happens when people start to see each other only as *parents* or *teens*, and not as *people*. Those labels, as with all labels, can cause a lot of problems. When we start labeling people, we stop seeing them as human beings. That makes it much easier to hate, harass, and hurt them. It also makes it a lot easier to believe crazy things about them. Once you label someone, and do not see him as a person, arguing with him

is like arguing with a mirror: *Your anger bounces right back at you.*

Labeling can even cause a kind of peculiar blindness, where you can see the world only from your side of things. It's called Me-opia.

### **Shared Blindness**

Parents and teens both have a kind of blindness. Teens have always had a kind of blindness that their parents call being self-centered. It's seen in that unending battle over check-in times:

Parent: "I need you to call me to let me know that you're OK."

Teen: "If I know that I'm OK, why should I have to call you?"

In a teenager's head, that line makes perfect sense, because most of you think of issues only from your view of the world. That's normal for most kids. It's just a function of your brain (see Chapter 1) and development (see Chapter 3). It's very hard for you to see beyond your own world and consider things from the view of a parent. This blindness makes teen-parent relationships very hard.

Parents have always had a kind of blindness that their teenagers call being over-controlling. It's seen in that unending battle over check-in times:

Parent: "I need you to call me to let me know that you're OK."

Teen: "If I know that I'm OK, why should I have to call you?"

In a parent's head, that line makes zero sense, because most parents think of issues only from their view of the world. That's normal for most parents. It's just a function of their love and fear. It's very hard for parents to see beyond their own world and consider things from your view. This blindness makes teen-parent relationships very hard. And when we go blind in a relationship, we use labels to fill in all the parts of a person that we can no longer see.

Like when a person is labeled as a *parent* (by her teen), she can become nothing but a jury/judge/jailer, a controlling, insane monster who enjoys thinking of new, nasty ways to make life miserable for her teen. And a person labeled as a *teenager* (by his parent) can look like an arrogant attitude on legs—a terrorist who loves starting painful fights that hurt others, just to hurt others. These creatures labeled *parents* and *teens* aren't thought to have any soft feelings that get hurt, good intentions that get trashed, or deep sadness that never gets voiced. Only *people* have those things. This kind of thinking is what starts "mirror wars"—circles of hurt that never end.

Yet, when an adolescent or a parent says something that hurts a *person*, I see them stop and think about what it was like for that *person* to be hurt. Most will then apologize, and feel bad for hurting that *person*, and try to not do that in the future.

*But when a teen hurts a parent, or a parent hurts a teen, I see very few stop and think about what it was like for the other to be hurt. Most never apologize for hurting the other. They each tell me that apologizing is a dumb thing to do because the other is not really a person, and an apology would only be seen as a sign of weakness. They each tell me that the other doesn't actually get hurt, like a person.*

Well, they do. I know this, because, when we're alone, they show me. Parents and teens do get wounded by each other, and they both hurt from their pain. Both cry, thinking that they've lost each other forever. But you'd never guess it, seeing them together. Usually, everyone's so busy keeping their game faces on that they snicker at a suggestion from me about sharing their hurt feelings with each other. After all, *parents* and *teens* are not *people*, right?

One night, one parent and one teenager found out differently. But it didn't start out that way. It started out as it always had: like a mirror war.

Joe the father squared off with Joe the son. In seeing them separately a few times, I had never realized how identical they were until I watched them go toe-to-toe that night. Alone with me, they were very different from each other. But together, they looked almost exactly alike, as if they were one person arguing in a mirror: Neither could see the person in the other. They could see only their own rage in the other.

Dad took the first shots, after his 13-year-old son waved him on, as if to say, "Go ahead—take your best shot." Dad waved right back as he spoke. He looked like "nothin' but nasty," just as his son had described him.

"This boy is disrespectful, foul-mouthed, and lazy. He hates us—no, no, he 'despises' us, as he loves to say. He has no shame, no regrets for treating us like dirt—he has no feelings at all. There's no heart in him. I'm sending him to live at a military school next month, and he couldn't care less about leaving us. You know what he said when I told him? He said, 'Fine. I'll f'ng leave tomorrow, 'cause I can't f'ng

be with you another day.' The father turned and blasted his son. "YOU DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT ANYONE BUT YOU. YOU'RE THE MOST SELF-CENTERED, SPOILED BRAT I'VE EVER SEEN. I'M ASHAMED THAT YOU'RE MY CHILD. I DON'T WANT YOU AROUND MY FAMILY."

The father's "mirror" (his son) yelled right back. Just like dad, he was "nothin' but nasty" as well. "YOU WANTED ME GONE A YEAR AGO, THE FIRST TIME I EVER DARED TO TALK BACK TO YOU. I'LL TELL YOU THE EXACT DAY YOU DECIDED TO GET RID OF ME. TELL THE F'NG TRUTH! YOU'VE HATED ME EVER SINCE I DARED TO TELL YOU THAT I WASN'T GOING TO YOUR STUPID CHURCH ANYMORE. I EMBARRASSED YOU IN FRONT OF GRANDPOP. I SAW IT IN YOUR FACE. YOU CAN'T F'NG STAND IT WHEN ANYBODY DOES ANYTHING YOU DON'T LIKE. YOU'RE AN INSANE CONTROL FREAK, YOU KNOW THAT? I'LL BE SOOO HAPPY TO GET THE HELL OUT OF YOUR INSANE ASYLUM. AND I'M NEVER COMING BACK. NEVER!"

Both of their faces had the exact same look, as they both turned to me in the exact same manner, both holding up their hands as if to say about the other, "See, he's not a person. He has no feelings. No love, no remorse, no sadness, no fear. He's just an unfeeling bastard. It's hopeless."

I made them both even angrier by betraying their secrets, and exposing their hearts.

"You know what's really weird?" I asked. "What's really weird is that both of you are liars, and yet both of you think that you're so straight up." I turned to face the senior side of the mirror (dad). "Yesterday, you sat in that very spot and wept for, what, 10 minutes? You were nothing but pain, and hurt, and loss. You said your gut was tearing in half when you thought about sending your son away, because you love him so much, and you would miss him so terribly. And now you sit here and talk like that? You're a liar!" Before dad could react, I turned on his son, the junior side of the mirror, whose astonished chin was about to the floor.

"And you're a bigger liar," I continued. "Last week, you sat in that same spot as your father and cried more than him. You told me about how hurt and scared you felt about being sent away. You told me

stories about how you used to be so close with your father, and how horrible it felt to be at war with him. You told me that when you had a bad fever in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, you woke up in the middle of the night to find your ‘insane control freak’ father laying on the floor next to you, staying awake all night to be sure you were OK, and . . .” Here, Dad cut me off. He was listening.

“I didn’t know you knew I was there,” he said with a husky voice. “Of course I knew,” his son answered, “I know all of the stuff you’ve done for me . . .” His voice choked and then trailed off in confusion. A long silence set in that begged to be shattered.

“You guys are something, you know that?” I said. “You’re great at the fighting, in-your-face, ‘you-lookin’-at-me’ stuff, but you’re really, really bad at telling the truth. The truth for both of you is that your anger is nothing but a cover for your pain. Neither of you thinks that you’re strong enough to tell the truth—to show the hurt under all that rage. Because, then, you’ll have to admit that you love each other, and that’s harder to do than hating each other. You want to be tough guys? Fine! Try being tough enough to take a risk. Try being strong enough to tell the truth—that you’re each hurting each other because you love each other, and you miss each other. Tell me I’m wrong. I’m listening.”

The mirror was quiet now. Each face was amazed to see tears in the other. Each face was silent, overcome by waves of hurt, loss, and love. Then, the mirror finally disappeared. The parent and the teen looked at each other, and each saw a person. For a moment, they connected.

### **CONNECTIONS: What It's All About**

Ever wonder about what makes some families so happy and successful? The answer is *connections*. These are invisible lines of love that bind people together: husband to wife, and parent to child. When these connections are strong, they’re like steel cables that keep people from drifting apart, even in bad times (like rough teen years). When these connections are weak, small problems become huge fights, causing people who truly love each other (like parents and teens) to

drift farther and farther apart, to a point where they can't see the other as a *person* anymore. Finally, the distance grows so great that they can't send or receive love. That's when the connection finally snaps.

Does that sound silly to you? Well, think for a minute. Can't you remember feeling close with your parents at some time in your life, a time when it felt good and safe to be with them? It's not like you thought about "connections"; it's just that it felt natural and right. What you felt was exactly what a connection is.

Now do you feel distant and apart from your parents, like there's this wall between you? And even explaining a simple feeling to them seems like so much effort it's not worth it? Perhaps it's getting harder to see them as *people*, and not *parents*? If that's happening with you, the odds are that your parents are having these same symptoms, as well. You're both feeling the loss of *connection*. That turns out to be a contagious and costly disease, but one that can be cured, and even prevented.

To do that, I'd like to strengthen those ties between you and your folks. The way I suggest doing this is to sneak you into their world, to give you an inside look at what goes on in the life of a parent. You might find a lot of surprises. You might also find that your views of your parents might be very different by the end of this chapter. They might be, like, *people*?

### **Who Are These Guys (Parents)?**

It's quite absurd when you think about it. If you're going to do it right, what job on this planet can possibly be more challenging, more personally demanding, more frustrating, and, at times, more scary, than being a parent? Each child is a completely different set of challenges, and each kid is constantly changing. There is so much to learn so quickly about so many things, it feels completely overwhelming.

But you get no training, no practice, no trial run to see if you're any good at this before you make a commitment. You have to just jump in and make it up as you go along. It's nuts!

I can so clearly remember the day my wife went into labor with our first child. She was fine, but *I* had a hard time breathing. It was wonderful and exciting and all, but I also had this sensation, like

when you first get on some killer theme-park ride, and it's slowly climbing to that first awful drop. You think that maybe you made a terrible mistake, and you're sure you can't handle it, but it's too late to get off. So you just grab on and grit your teeth. Suddenly, I was being hurtled at light speed from a free, do-whatever-I-want lifestyle to . . . *what?*

I had no idea of *what*. Now how was I supposed to be, act, and talk? I'm not a parent, for God's sake, whatever that is—I'm *me*. You know, *me*: motorcycles, racquetball, sports cars, last-minute scuba trips to the islands, eating out whenever I feel like it, staying up all night if I feel like it, sleeping all day if I feel like it. Now, overnight, I'm supposed to become station wagons, car seats, and diaper bags (*diapers? Are you kidding me?*). And no sleep, no time, no money, no trips to the islands.

Panic started to settle in. I am not kidding when I said I had trouble breathing.

Then, my son was born. I held him in the first minute of his life. He opened his worried eyes and looked dead-on into mine, like he was searching them to see if I was up to the job of being his parent. He grabbed my thumb with his tiny hand, still searching my eyes with his. Finally, I told him that we were his family, that we loved him, and that everything was going to be all right. As silly as this sounds (talking to a newborn and all), I remember hoping that he

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would believe me, because *I* didn't believe me. I didn't know if everything would be all right. I was terrified. But my son sighed contentedly, closed his eyes, and went to sleep, as if he believed me. Whew! He bought it.

That was the first of a million and three scenes where I faked my way through some situation with my children, acting like I knew what I was doing, when I hadn't the

foggiest idea, trying to make them feel secure and loved—and parented by someone who knew how to do this parent thing—all the while, feeling like I didn't.

I share my story with you because your own parents have stories very similar to mine. Parents are not born, trained, or bred as parents. They're just regular people who kind of get drafted. You can

read all the parenting books, and take all the parenting classes, but the fact remains that no one knows how to do this parenting thing until they've done it. There simply is no way to know what it's like until you've been there. Even then, you're constantly faced with new parenting problems you've never seen before, because your kids keep growing and changing, and each child is so different. It's a lot like being thrown into a deep lake to learn how to swim—over, and over, and over. You never “get it right,” you just get it done—as best you can. You learn to deal with constant self-doubt, worry, and fear. You also learn the art of “faking it” very well, trying to give your children the confidence that you're in charge, and that you know what you're doing—even when you don't.

And you get to do all this while juggling all your other problems. Like tight money, tough marriages, and terrible jobs you can't afford to quit—because now you have kids. Somehow, you learn to cope with more than you ever thought possible.

Most of all, you learn to hide all of this worry from your kid. Like a good actor, you build this “parent” character that your children think is all you are. They have no idea that you used to be motorcycles, scuba diving, concerts, and clothes less than 10 years' old. To your kids, if you play the role well, you were *born* a parent: dull, predictable, lifeless, and corny. They think you *like* dumb cars, stupid clothes, and cheap vacations. They think you *enjoy* budgets, recycling, and harassing over homework. They think you *get excited* about two-for-one sales and back-to-school nights. Some parents can run this act for 10 or 12 years and do OK. Some even get a little smug, thinking, “Hey, this is no big deal. I can't believe those other parents can't control their kids. My 10-year-old is a perfect child because I'm such a good parent.”

And then adolescence hits. BAM! It all comes apart. One day, your kid suddenly exposes all your weaknesses. She knows just how to push your buttons to turn good old calm, unshakable dad into a raving lunatic, stammering and staggering as he reels from insult after insult, trying to regain control. Your old parental smugness becomes a cruel joke, as you remember that you don't know what you're doing—and now as a parent of an adolescent, no less. That child who sweetly did everything you told him suddenly turns and snarls, “No! I'm not going, and you can't make me!” And you have no idea what to do.

Just then, do you know what feeling comes creeping back? "... it's like when you first get on some killer theme-park ride, and it's slowly climbing to that first awful drop. You think that maybe you made a terrible mistake, and you're sure you can't handle it, but it's too late to get off. ..."

So what exactly are they trying to do? Your parents are trying to do a bunch of things that they know about. They have a list of things that they want to see happen in your life. We'll get to those in a minute. But they're also doing something else that greatly affects your relationship with them *that they don't even know is happening*. It's called grieving.

Ross's dad was very sad. "I know this sounds dumb, but I can't get what happened out of my head. My 12-year-old son and I are very close. I love him more than I can say, and I respect him as a person, for all the wonderful things he is, you know? I really, really like hanging out with him, just watching how he handles the world.

"Last night, I go to the basement to nicely remind him to get ready for bed, like I've done on most nights forever, and he suddenly turns and snarls at me, yelling, 'DONT SAY ANOTHER WORD, ALL RIGHT? JUST SHUT UP AND LEAVE, ALL RIGHT?'

"I know this stuff is normal for kids when they hit adolescence, and I know it's not how he really feels about me. And I know what he said is not such a big deal. But, at the same time, I don't know that, or at least it's hard for me to believe that. I felt very hurt. I felt like something great between us had died. I felt tears in my eyes, missing my sweet son who never snarled at me like that.

"The worst part is what I did with my pain. I turned it into anger. I wanted to slap my son around for daring to talk to me like that. I could feel a rage rising up inside of me, telling me to put my hands on this wonderful young man that I love so much, someone I've never even spanked.

"The ugly truth is very hard to say. I wanted to make him cry and be scared of me. It's like I needed to beat him down, to make him beg for my forgiveness. I started to think of ways to hurt him back, maybe with punishments, perhaps taking away something that he loves. At first, I fooled myself into thinking I would just be disciplining him for being disrespectful—you know, being a good

parent and all. But the ugly truth is that I really wanted to hurt him back.

“I hate these feelings. I know better than most parents how stupid it is to hurt a kid for being hurtful. In my work, I tell other parents to not discipline their kids with anger. I preach fine words about ‘teaching’ kids to be better instead of ‘hurting’ them to be better, and there I was, fighting off an urge to demolish my own son.

“When I really get to the heart of this, I see that I’m grieving the loss of my son, of how he used to be. I miss my little boy so much that I get mad at this occasionally arrogant teen who took over his body. Yet, at the same time, I know that this is still my son, and that he needs me now, more than ever. I know this is not the time to pull away from him, because adolescence is such a hard time for kids.

This ‘good parenting’ stuff is so easy to say, and so hard to do. It makes you want to shake those parenting experts (like me?) who seem to talk down to parents who screw up (like me?).

—From the personal journal of Dr. Michael Bradley

### **Parental Grief: Did You Know You Died?**

The first thing that your parents are trying to do is to grieve your death—that is, the death of the little child you used to be. But they usually don’t even know this is happening.

Most parents fall totally in love with their children when they’re small. Young kids are easy to parent. They do what they’re told, they don’t curse, they go to bed before 1 a.m., and, most importantly, they think their parents are great. Young children look up to Mom and Dad because parents can do so many things so much better. Like play baseball, solve math problems, or make bruised heads and hearts magically heal with a hug. While all this is nice for the kid, it’s even nicer for the parents because they get all this admiration for doing things that are pretty simple. They can easily solve all the problems of their kid’s world. That feels great to them and looks great to their kid.

Then one terrible day, the parents’ skills seem to crash. It’s not that they’ve changed, but that their kid has grown into adolescence,

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a time when the parents' skills don't mean nearly as much. To a teen, dad's throwing arm suddenly looks pee-wee league. Mom's math magic can't cut Algebra II. And the painful emotional bruises of adolescent life can no longer be cured with that old hug. Overnight, the parents feel useless. They can't seem to solve any problems in their kid's world, and that feels awful to them. *But the kid hardly notices any difference. Suddenly, seeing her parents as sort-of-stupid just feels normal, as if it's always been that way.* But the fact is that parents see (and feel) a huge change. They fall from being number one to disappearing off their kid's list of admired people. That change causes sadness in your folks that is so strong we call it grief.

Other teen changes in you hurt your folks, as well. Have you noticed that you can be snappier at times, perhaps even vicious once in a while? Have you recently heard yourself saying things to your parents you wouldn't have dared to say when you were 10? Those changes (see Chapters 1, 2, and 3) are normal and are an important part of growing up. But they can hurt Mom and Dad a lot more than you think.

When kids say mean things to their parents, they are usually just reacting to some rule (like bedtime?) or punishment that they think is dumb or unfair. They're not trying to hurt their parents; they're just arguing back. But in arguing back, mean words that surprise the kids as well as shock the parents sometimes jump out of impulsive adolescent brains. When I ask kids if they meant those words, most tell me, "No, not really. I just get so mad at her dumb rules that I end up calling her a dumb bitch. She knows I don't really mean that." You think?

The parents think that the hurtful words were meant. They don't believe me when I tell them that their teen who says hurtful words tells me that she does respect her parents and feel close with them. They are further amazed when I show them the research that shows *most* teenagers respect and feel close with their parents, even though they sometimes say some lousy things to their folks.

How can this be, the parents ask? How can our teen seem so disrespectful, arrogant, and cold, and yet respect us? I answer, because you are taking his words too personally, and forgetting that kids often say things that they don't really mean. Plus, I add, you are grieving the old days when your kid used to tell you how great you were.

When a child becomes a teenager, the teenager stops doing some things that make a parent feel great, and starts doing some things that make a parent feel bad. She rebels and starts to disagree with her parent's opinions. Or he speaks his mind more, sometimes in ways that are not very polite. This is all part of growing up. But because the teen changes how he talks and acts doesn't mean that he changes his feelings for his parents.

Adolescents still see that a parent does respect-earning things, like work hard to provide money, take care of family members, and have a good set of values about things like drugs. What changes is that teens don't *tell* parents many good things anymore—but they sure tell the bad.

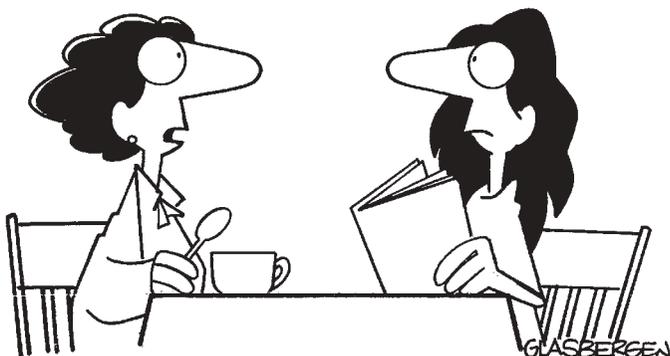
That's because your relationship with your parents can become more about control than caring. As you roll into adolescence, you push for more freedom and independence, as you should. But that can cause your relationship with Mom and Dad to become a contest of control. You and they can suddenly find yourselves on opposite sides of a contest about who's in charge of your life. Once that happens, your parents can literally feel as if the old "you" died, and that the new "you" hates them. That terrible parent pain is grief.

### **What Does Parent Grief Do?**

A lot more than you think. Parents often take all that sadness and turn it into anger, without even thinking about it. Then they seem to turn cold toward you, treating you like some uncaring, irresponsible lunatic. Grieving parents can go in one of two ways. Some clamp down like crazy, making your life miserable, with punishments, policing, spying, and very few privileges. This, of course, only makes you angrier, which makes your parents angrier . . . it never ends.

Other grieving parents can do the opposite, turning away from you, saying, "Whatever." They might quit parenting you, allowing you to do whatever you want, whenever you want, however you want. That might sound good at first, but it's not. Younger teenagers, in particular, are not ready to be cut loose yet. Like it or not, most still need parents to keep them from self-destructing. You

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"FRIDAY NIGHT YOU STAYED OUT UNTIL 9:00, YESTERDAY YOU HAD COLA INSTEAD OF MILK AND THIS MORNING YOU FORGOT TO FLOSS. YOUR FATHER AND I ARE AFRAID YOU'RE GETTING TOO WILD."

may have seen this happen with a friend. Initially, the "freed" teen has a great time, but then things gradually come apart. About every young "freed" teen I've ever met was either depressed, or rageful, or in jail. Many die.

Finally, there's the group that represents most parents. They use both, the "controlling" and the "whatever" styles, bouncing back and forth, frantically trying to figure out which style works the best. One week, they're seeing how a no-curfew rule works (the "whatever" style). After you roll in at 4 a.m. a couple of times, they then try the take-aways (the "controlling" style). When the only thing left in your room that has not been taken away is the floor, the "no-curfew" rule starts to look good to them again.

A large part of this back-and-forth parent craziness has to do with their grief, with your folks missing the old "you," and trying desperately to get the old "you" back. But neither the "whatever" nor the "controlling" parenting style can get the old you back, because the old you doesn't exist anymore. This is a cold fact that your parents have to deal with if they are to make new connections with the new you. But doing this requires effort, by both them *and* you.

Don't let the grief of your parents over losing the "little kid you" cause you to lose your connections with them. Remember, in the family game, it's all about the *connections*.

### **So What Can I DO?**

Dominick asked me that question. He thought my answer was pretty dumb. At first, anyway.

Dominick sat and shook his head at me, slowly and sadly, as if he had heard the most lame idea of all time come out of my mouth. With a snicker, he asked, "Did you ever play football, Dr. Bradley? 'Cause if you did, you must have been lousy at it. In the middle of a football game, it's, like, not a good idea to give the opposing linebackers a hug and tell them what's *special* about them.

"That's what you want me to do with my parents? Living with them is just that—a football game. It's all about who wins and who loses. I have to be tough with them, or they'll take over my whole life. I only get some freedom now because I go nuts on them sometimes. If I act all nice, they'll take advantage of me."

I sat and wondered how to get around this 220-pound, 16-year-old football player. I decided I'd have to play his game. "Last week, Dom, you told me about that reverse [a trick football play] you ran that the other team was not expecting? It worked great, because it caught them off balance. It was not what they expected, and it was not what you had been doing up to then. You knew that if you kept doing what you'd been doing, the result would have been the same. So trying some really radical, bizarro move worked well, right?" He nodded.

"Well, here you are again, in another hard game, this time with your parents. Up to now, you keep trying the same play with them, acting tough, and it gets you very little. So why not do some really radical, bizarro play, to catch your parents off balance? It might get you a lot further than doing what you've done. And, personally, I can think of nothing more radical or bizarro than the Dumpster [his nickname] giving his parents a hug and telling them something nice." Because he laughed, I pressed my luck. "Dom, what is special about your parents? There must be one good thing about one of them?"

Dom looked liked he was giving the football away, something he never did. He answered with a sigh, rolling his eyes—but he

answered. “Well, my dad works like crazy in a job where they treat him really bad. I know he wants to quit, but he can’t, ’cause he doesn’t have a college degree, and they pay him a lot there. He does that for us, his family, you know? But I think it really kills him. The jerk boss gives him crap all the time for stuff he didn’t do, and he has to stand there and get abused—and in front of the guys who work for him.” Dom the Dumpster suddenly looked grown up. “That must really kill him, you know? How can he get up everyday at 5 a.m. and go into that place with that asshole boss? I couldn’t do that. And he never complains to me or my little sisters. I only know ’cause I hear him talking to Mom late at night, when he thinks we’re asleep.” Now Dom looked a little ashamed. “One time, I think he was, you know, like, crying.” He shook his head at himself. “Now that I think about it, I guess I’ve been like my father’s asshole boss. I guess maybe I abuse him, too. And he takes it, mostly.”

“That’s it, Dominick,” I said. “There’s your reverse. When things are calm, sit down next to him, and tell him how much you appreciate what he does for his family. Tell him you’re sorry for sometimes being another asshole in his life. *Hug the linebacker*. Maybe you guys can stop playing football and start being, like, a family?” Dom tried picturing that scene in his head. “I can’t see me doing that,” he said. “I just can’t.” “That’s the problem with reverses,” I explained. “They’re so different you can’t picture them until you do them. *Just do it, OK?*”

The Dumpster laughed. “You shrinks get your ideas from sneaker commercials?”

“Nah,” I retorted, “they stole that line from us . . . because it works.”

Trick plays work so well because they upset everything and create new possibilities that people couldn’t see before. Reaching out to your parents in the middle of a control contest, and telling them something that you love and admire about them, can create new possibilities. Like helping grieving parents see that they didn’t lose their child after all. Like disarming parents’ anger, and their need to control you so much. Like showing parents that you are more mature and thoughtful than they thought—so maybe they can trust you more?

It’s all about those *connections*. When you stop fighting with parents and connect, you allow them to see the good parts of you, and

you get to see good parts of them, as well. These good parts are never seen in fights. They only become visible when people stop yelling and try something else—like connecting.

### **"Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise": Your Parents' Wish List**

So far, we've shown that parents are just *people* (with feelings), that they are learning this parent job as they go along, and that they feel sad that the old you "died" (that they lost their connections with you). Most of all, we've seen that when parents become scared or sad, they get mad—just like the rest of us. They cover their hurt with anger—just like the rest of us.

*Parents are  
terrified of all the  
evils surrounding you  
in this nutso world.*

On top of all those disabilities, let's add the list of things that your parents are trying to make happen in your life, because they love you. They want you to exit your adolescence healthy, wealthy, and wise. Sounds easy, doesn't it? That nice-sounding list turns out to be a real monster that eats connections for lunch.

*Healthy.* This category is about sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll (violence). Parents are terrified of all the evils surrounding you in this nutso world. Each day, their newspapers are stocked with stories of kids getting terribly hurt by sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll. The statistics are really scary. Much of what they worry about is keeping you alive. Their fear can make life miserable for everyone, as they fight to keep you away from the sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll.

*Wealthy.* This heading includes things like doing well in school, becoming self-reliant, and having a set of values to help you make good decisions. Most parents define wealth not just in dollars, but in happiness. The problem is that your definition of happy may differ greatly from theirs. For your parents, happiness includes all of those things they list under healthy and wealthy. They see your road to happiness as avoiding sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll, doing well in school, and so on.

You may see their road map for your happiness as one that ruins your fun. That's because the road to real happiness is often one that

ruins fun—having fun and being happy are *not* the same things, although kids and parents often become confused about this.

You know all about fun. Sometimes, fun involves doing things that can hurt you. That kind of fun is *now*, *unthinking*, and *rebellious*. Happy is *long-term*, *thoughtful*, and *calm*. Fun is sneaking out of the house to hang with friends instead of doing boring, stupid homework. Happy is waking up the next day feeling good about having done the stupid, boring homework instead of sneaking out. Fun can be a drug to avoid feeling bad. Happy is the antidote to feeling bad.

*Wise*. This is a tough one to define. I think most parents define wise as meaning that you should turn out better than them—no kidding. Most parents (especially this one) have some regrets about their lives. Most can instantly tell you what they would have done differently if they could rewind the video of their life. If you ask, they'll tell you about mistakes they made, like going to school, not going to school; joining the military, not joining the military; making promises they should not have made, breaking promises they should have kept—a million and one things that all have one thing in common: They are all about a lack of wisdom. If you ask what that means, they'll tell you that they made these bad decisions for the wrong reasons. Like fear, or not believing in themselves, or taking the easy path. The greatest regrets you'll hear from adults are about abandoning their values, and giving up what they believe in. Many regrets have to do with people not knowing what they believe in, not knowing who they are. Now you know that another word for wisdom might be *identity*. As you saw in Chapter 3, identity is what you should be all about. But as you also saw in Chapter 3, your quest for identity can put you and your parents on opposite sides of that family fence.

So, although teens and parents all agree that *healthy*, *wealthy*, and *wise* sound like good goals, how parents get you to those things can start wars. Like I said, that list can eat your family connections for lunch.

### **How Do They Try to Do This?**

Mostly, your parents try to get you healthy, wealthy, and wise just as their own parents did with them—with fear and anger. In the old days, fear and anger seemed to work great as a way of raising kids. I

was a model child because I was terrified a lot. I didn't learn much about what was right or wrong. I just learned how to do what the scary adults told me to do. Adults like Sister Credenza.

Sister Credenza was a nun who taught my 8<sup>th</sup>-grade Catholic school class. Credenza's real name was Sister Cardoza, or Sister Carena, or something like that. But she so closely resembled a large piece of dining-room furniture that she was always known as Sister Credenza to us 13-year-olds. But that resemblance was purely in appearance. In action, she was more like a battle tank.

One of her favorite methods of "teaching" right from wrong was to bounce bad boys' heads off of good slate chalkboards (the girls were subjected to less physical, though perhaps worse, "teaching" methods). When particularly peeved, she would grab an offender by one ear, run him up the aisle to the front of the room, and, with a pivot action that would impress an Olympic discus thrower, she'd whirl and bounce the sinner's noggin off the slate. Years later, I had an auditory flashback to these episodes while I was hitting golf balls. The noise was the same "thwok" as a good tee shot.

Dennis O'Leary was one of Credenza's favorite "thwokees." He was one tough Irish kid who seemed to have been prepared by Mother Nature for his encounters with Credenza. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, his whole head looked a little too large for his body, with a huge, gnarly forehead that reminded me of one of those horned dinosaurs.

Toward the end of that year, O'Leary had taken a sort of suicidal turn in his Credenza confrontations, starting with smirking off her head "thwoks." Even while he was rebounding off of the slate, his grin was becoming obvious. This, of course, further infuriated Credenza, much like a heavyweight boxer losing his punch. With each of his successive trip to the slates, she seemed to add more and more force to the throws, while O'Leary added more and more grin to the rebounds. We all knew this was headed in a bad direction.

One rainy day in May, both O'Leary and Credenza seemed to sense that, with the season almost over (the school year), neither had established himself or herself as the clear winner in this game. O'Leary set the stage for the final showdown by drawing a picture of Sister Credenza (as a credenza with huge boobs and fangs) into his desktop—*in ink*. Ink was used on desks by Catholic school boys only

for true suicide missions. Sure enough, Credenza saw the artwork, and the “Super Bowl” was on.

Without breaking stride, she swooped down the aisle, grabbed *both* of O’Leary’s huge ears, spun, reversed direction, and stormed toward the slates. Hitting speeds never before seen, she launched O’Leary at the blackboard from Adrienne Arinetti’s desk, a good three feet away.

The time to impact must have been about one-tenth of a second. Yet, I can recall that scene going into slow motion, like in a martial-arts movie. The most amazing thing of all was seeing a *grin* appearing on O’Leary’s face as he hurtled toward his fate. What did he know?

The answer arrived by sound. Instead of the usual “thwok,” a “CRRRAACCKK” echoed around the room. A couple of kids screamed at the noise, covering their eyes to avoid seeing O’Leary’s red-haired head shattered like an Easter egg. Instead, as the chalk dust settled, there stood a triumphant Irishman, wiping the blood of final victory from his forehead, gazing proudly at the hole his head, like some artillery shell, had punched through the slate. And he was *laughing*.

I was a “good” kid only because I did not share the kind of confidence in my forehead that O’Leary had in his. I was good to *avoid getting beaten*, not for the sake of being good. In fact, I knew very little about good and bad, despite years of “religious” education.

*In those old days, a parent could keep a lot of the insanity away from kids by “policing” the world around them.*

If you ask them, you’ll find that your parents have their own “ridiculous-but-true” stories about being scared into being good. That’s because, in the old days, you could more or less get away with frightening children into being safer. That’s because the

world around kids was a lot less dangerous. In those old days, a parent could keep a lot of the insanity away from kids by “policing” the world around them. Remember my mother tearing the underwear ads out of the Sears catalogue (see Chapter 3) to keep sex out of my life? My dad did his policing part, as well.

In 1968, my hoodlum friends and I were in my basement secretly listening to “The Devil’s Music.” Those were my father’s words for

the Doors (Jim Morrison) album that was around. He heard it playing, walked downstairs without a word, snatched the album off the turntable, smashed it against the wall, relit his cigar, and turned and walked upstairs—without a word. End of Devil's Music. There was no FM radio around, and no one had the bucks for another album. Back then, parents could smash, tear, and beat the evil away. At least to some extent. And all with no words.

Today, the insanity around kids is so complete, it pounds at them 24/7 and is available on demand. Smash a CD, and she'll copy it online in four seconds. Hide the underwear ads, and he'll hit the Web porn sites in three seconds. Smash a kid into a blackboard, and he'll call the cops in two. Or hit you back in one. Those old parenting methods are worse than useless in today's world. They keep kids from actually thinking about what's right or wrong, and instead make them think only of getting back at the parent. Yet those methods are what many parents have stuck with in their heads, because *watching one's own parents is the only "parent training" people have for when they become parents themselves.*

Because the craziness is so much worse in your world, parents should *teach* kids instead of police them. The teaching method involves lots of words and thoughts. The goal must be to help teens to develop their own codes of right or wrong. This approach helps them to handle the ten thousand tough decisions they will face when their parents are not around. The deal is to help adolescents be safer by building identities, not jails. We call that respect-based parenting (versus fear-based parenting).

But this respect-based stuff is so easy to say, and so hard to do, mostly because your parents are stuck with their own parents' rules of how-to-raise-a-teen. These rules were written into our child brains as we watched our own parents be parents. And we tend to fall back on those outdated methods, particularly when we're stressed or tired. Even when we know better.

"I had another one of my 'near episodes' the other night with my son. He's 13. In the past two months, he's suddenly jumping on every little thing I do wrong. If I mispronounce a word, or don't know the name of some current music or movie star, or even have my hair messed up, he loudly points it out, as if he can't believe how weird I

am. I know this is normal for 13, but it still hurts a little. After a day of taking shots like this, I was on my way to check the basement before going to bed. Ross was sprawled out in the family room, watching some show we both know I'd hate. He grunted an annoyed 'yes' answer when I asked if the basement had been picked up after he had been down there with some friends.

"I was really tired, and just wanted to crawl into bed (something else he now makes fun of), when I got to the basement landing and saw a huge mess. Junk was strewn everywhere, with popcorn bits and juice boxes left all around. I wanted to just explode. 'How dare he!' I thought. 'How dare he make fun of me, when he acts like a five-year-old doing a simple task. What's going to become of him? How is he going to manage his life if he can't manage one lousy chore?'"

"As I started to clean things up, I felt angry blood rushing to my head. With each item I picked up, my rage increased. Soon, I was hurling toys into the closet. As the 'American Girl' doll crashed into the toy bin, I decided, 'Enough was enough, goddammit! I'm getting his butt down here this instant!' I whirled and headed up the steps. In my head, an old scene flashed before my eyes: In my best intimidation stance, I was supposed to block his view of the TV, loudly and sarcastically 'thank' him for doing such a great job in the basement, and then wait until he dared to say something back. Then I would go nuts on him—in his face, screaming how sick I was of all this crap, his lack of responsibility, and so on. Maybe I'd shove him, just to make a point that he'd better damn well respect me! Then he'd learn how to be more responsible, and have a better life. So screaming at him would really be for his own good. Right. That crazy scene was a battle plan in my head. I was ready to go.

"Thank God for long basement stairs. As I climbed, a small voice inside of me started to ask where I'd played in that scene before. That's when it hit me: That was my own father's way of 'teaching.' And then I remembered how much I hated that, and how much it hurt, and how much it drove me away from him. I paused halfway up and sank down on a step, totally confused, but getting clearer. I started to remember who my son really was. Yes, an occasional slob, but also the most giving, courageous, and loyal 'slob' you'll ever meet. A young man with the heart of a lion, who at age 8 fought back his terror at seeing our family falling apart after taking in a difficult foster

child. Even at that young age, and under that kind of fire, he insisted that we adopt that baby and make her part of our family. ‘How dare I!’ I thought. ‘How dare I get so mad over something so stupid with someone so wonderful.’

That old family rage drained out of me, like stale air from a punctured balloon. I felt more tired, but a lot wiser now. Yet one strange thing still bounced around in my head: ‘American Girl’ doll? Ross?’ That’s when it hit me. The mess was from Ross’ five-year-old sister. I shuddered when I realized how close I had come to demolishing my wonderful son over something so stupid that was not even his.

—Notes from the personal journal of Dr. Michael Bradley

If your parents ever act crazy like that one almost did, try to remember these things about them: They’re people, they love you, and they’re trapped between two worlds of how to raise kids. They’re worried that, if they stop being tough with you, you’ll end up dying from a heroin overdose. Their heads tell them that respectful parenting methods are better, but their guts tell them to go nutso, like their own parents would.

If you want the respect approach from them, you have to show your parents that it pays off. How do you do that? With connections (tired of that word yet?). When parents feel close to their kid, and feel like they have an idea of what goes on in their teen’s world, they tend to stay a lot calmer and use the respect approach a lot more than the fear and control methods you hate.

So a lot of what happens with your parents *is* in your hands. You can make changes in yourself that can radically change how things go with your parents. It’s up to you whether or not you want to take a shot at making things different. What kind of changes? Funny you should ask.

*You can make changes in yourself that can radically change how things go with your parents.*

### How Can I Change Things?

By building those connections. You do that by talking, sharing, and hanging out—*with your parents*. If that sounds *totally* impossible,

maybe it's time to get some outside help (see Chapter 4). Call a truce in the fighting, and say that you hate living like this, and that they probably hate living like this, so maybe it's time to sit down with a shrink to see if things can get better. I can just about guarantee that they'll go for it.

If that hanging-out idea only sounds *nearly* impossible, here's a trick to help you start to talk, and to learn about each other without getting into the curfew and homework fights. I know, I know—you get annoyed with books that have all those exercises and worksheets. I promised myself I would not do that to you in this book. But maybe we could make a teeny exception, because this trick works really well? It's called Larry King Live.

### **Larry King Live?**

Interview each other. You go first. One session for Mom, and another for Dad. Put together a list of questions, and bring a tape recorder, so you can write it out later if you want (some kids use this as an extra-credit writing assignment for psychology, English, or even health class—the teachers love it). You might want to take them out to a coffee shop to do this (I don't know why, but people talk better there—perhaps it's the caffeine). Do this as if you've never met your parents, and you've been assigned to find out who they are—because, as you'll come to see, *you guys really don't know much about each other*.

Here are some interview questions you might try, but know that the best ones are those that you think of yourself.

#### Parent Interview Questions

- What were you like when you were 10 years old? 15? 20? 30?
- What's been your greatest joy in life?
- What's been your deepest sadness?
- What do you do when you're scared?
- What was the best sleeping dream you ever had?
- If you could change one thing in your life, what would it be?
- What did you love about your own father? And mother?
- What did you hate about your own mother? And father?
- When you were 15, who did you think you'd be today?
- Did life turn out like you thought it would?

- What do you truly believe about God and religion?
- What is left undone in your life that you want to do?
- What is it like being a parent?

After you've done their interviews, each of your parents should separately do yours. The rules are that 1) everyone gets to refuse any question he or she wants, 2) everyone agrees to tell the truth, and 3) everyone agrees to keep some answers secret if that's what the subject wants.

That's it. Seem silly? Try it and see. I'll bet you'll be amazed at how different the two of you will be when you stop being *parent* and *teen*, and start being, you know, like *people*. This kind of talking might even become habit forming, like that mocha latte at the coffee shop. There are worse habits you could pick up than hanging out with your folks at the coffee shop. So, if the interview goes well, consider making this a weekly show? You could call it *CONNECTIONS*. That show can change your whole world.

And speaking of your world, it's time to move on to the next part that plays such a huge roll in shaping who you are, and what you might become. Unfortunately, there's more bad news here than good, because this particular aspect of your world has been under a vicious assault that has put it on its knees in our culture. It's on the ropes, barely hanging on to life, and tossed around like trash. It's become so endangered that, if we don't watch out, the only place you'll soon see it is in a museum. Yet study after study tells us over and over that this one thing is the key to keeping kids confident, caring, and connected. It's called *the family*.

*I'll bet you'll be amazed at how different the two of you will be when you stop being parent and teen, and start being, you know, like people.*

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