

Section 8. Supporting Effective Parenting

Chapter 58

Kirsten Freitag Murray; and Michael Howard Ryan, MS, LPC

Parents Who Have Experienced Trauma and Marginalization: Engaging Them in a Strength-Based Partnership

Why This Matters

We best serve youth who have had hard lives when we see them through a strength-based lens. When they act out, we do not see just troubling behaviors but the life events that may have led to these behaviors. Likewise, with parents who have struggled themselves, we must replace “What’s wrong with you!” with “What happened to you?”¹ Just as we see young people as they deserve to be seen, we must also see all that is good and right in their parents. It is only then that we have earned the right to work alongside parents as we empower them to positively shape their children’s lives.

Building Youth by Strengthening Families

When young people send behavioral SOS signals, they communicate to us through their behaviors, partly to gain our attention. So let’s do right by them and by their parents. Let’s understand that we offer support to young people best when we strengthen their family relationships and empower their parents to be their guides toward adulthood.

We each have a vital role in supporting families, even though the length of our interactions may vary. While some helping professionals develop ongoing and enduring relationships with teens and parents, others play a very particular role in nurturing growth and change but never get to watch the progress and see the results.

Like with planting a garden, there’s work to be done in each season of the healing of a teen’s and parent’s wounds (and sometimes very different work), but it all matters. The school nurse may be the first to notice that the regular trips to her office for a stomachache point to something deeper than physical hunger pangs or general anxiety. She tills the soil by alerting the school counselor and parents and they take over with actually planting the seeds of change. While parents and counselors plant seeds, a family-based team may provide “sunlight” through their encouragement and support; a congregation’s food pantry may provide “fertilizer” through nourishment; a case manager may provide “shade” by linking the family to stable housing; the YWCA may “keep weeds at bay” by providing a stress-free place to express emotions through sports, art, drama, or homework help. While you may only interact once or a handful of times with a particular teen and his parent, you are part of the growth process.

Restoration of Power

Shifting from a behavioral management approach to a posture of curiosity, we give the family’s story center stage. While a mental health diagnosis may help classify patterns of behavior and indicate interventions for treatment, a diagnosis cannot tell us the personal story. Understanding the context and history in which a diagnosis exists is critical as we offer families healing through the experience of being heard, known, and understood.

Just as we all can play a positive critical role in the healing process, so, too, can even a brief interaction undermine the healing process or entirely derail a connection. This may be particularly true for people whose experience with discrimination and low expectation make them highly vigilant to disempowering

interactions—even when delivered with the best of intentions. Teens and their parents who have been marginalized and are therefore vulnerable have been pushed to the outskirts of society by systemic factors that block access to resources and opportunities for help. This can contribute to a profound sense of disempowerment. We have something different to offer: moving from hopelessness to hope through the restoration of power and healing in their relationships and lives, by counteracting disempowerment and seeking and polishing the treasure of hope buried within their stories.

Never forget that only a small portion of a person’s story can be defined by their pain. Listen first for whatever a family chooses to share when you simply ask, “Tell me what you’d like me to know about your family.”

For many families journeying through adolescence, however, parenting may be a new and daunting stage. Remarkable physical and psychological changes, along with a higher vulnerability to behavioral and emotional problems, are hallmarks of adolescence.² That, in addition to the teen’s developmentally appropriate and intense pursuit of independence, can be intimidating for parents. (See Chapter 53, Preparing Parents for Their Children’s Adolescence.)

For some families, their story is intertwined with the reality of discrimination and marginalization. This affects daily parent-teen interactions. As García and others note, “African American adolescents constantly navigate a world where they likely face discrimination which can pose significant threats to their emotional adjustment.”³ And as Scott and Pinderhughes report, “AA [African American] families incorporate into parenting preparation for bias...messages, which promote awareness of discrimination and provide guidance on coping with racially-hostile situations, in order to combat possible negative consequences.”⁴ For example, parents of color may parent their child more diligently than their white counterparts, to equip their children with survival skills in the majority culture. This requires encouraging academic performance, behavior, and social interactions to remain at peak levels. This is particularly true with parenting boys of color. Lessons on how to prepare for withstanding bias teach children of color ways of dealing with majority culture and can contribute to a core belief system of “I must always be at my best to escape minority culture stigmas and be accepted.”

Shame shows up when we believe we fall short of expectations and can become a constant negative self-narrative when a teen, parent, or family is pushed to the edges of society. Shame speaks forcefully, asserting that

- “I have defects, so I am defective.”
- “I carry brokenness, so I am broken.”
- “I’ve done wrong, so I am unworthy.”

The negative self-talk we rehearse and the shame we carry influence how we react to others and to the circumstances of life. Shame keeps secrets.

It is our duty to come alongside parents to help them reframe their own view of self—to see themselves as loving, well-intentioned, and capable parents who want to and can provide the love and guidance their teen needs from them.

Collective Experiences and Shared Memories

Suffering knows no color, and any family or community can endure discrimination and low expectation. Trauma knows no demographic. Family breakdown occurs in every social strata and can be invisible from outside the home. We must approach each family knowing they may have endured tremendous challenges.

However, as we serve families of color, we must also bear in mind that nearly all people of color have experienced undermining forces and implicit biases. Current indignities against individuals and communities of color remind us that these forces persist and may even be growing stronger. How we each may view these indignities differs depending on our own skin color, ethnicity, privilege, and power.

We must be curious about the experience of race, power, and privilege in each family's story. Helping families move from hopelessness to hope begins with putting aside our biases, prejudices, and preconceived notions about their situation to hear, understand, validate, and connect to their full story. Biases and stigma—attitudes and beliefs that lead people to reject, avoid, or fear those they perceive as being different—are rooted in faulty belief systems. They promote unwanted, negative generalizations concerning individuals and groups that lead to discrimination and low expectation.

Both public stigma and self-stigma inform at a communal and personal level the thinking and lived experience of teens and parents who are marginalized. Shame follows. Shame is a deep-seated and often painful feeling of distress or humiliation felt by the target of negative biases and stigma. Shame can manifest as self-blame in children who survive early trauma and seek to make sense of their experience by taking the responsibility for the adverse experiences they have endured. "It's my fault," they infer. But this coping mechanism does not help these children and teens as they mature into adults, leading often to depression, anxiety, reactive behaviors, and general mistrust. For these individuals, "I am at fault" means "I am never good enough, and I really don't deserve for things to go well." Stigma, shame, and self-blame form a negative internal feedback loop, reinforcing low self-esteem for both teens and parents.

Racial trauma or race-based stress can emerge from racial harassment, racial violence, or institutional racism, but it can also come from navigating unspoken implicit biases. People who endured these forces can manifest irritability, hypervigilance, and depression. Statistically more children of color live and grow in environments in which they experience high levels of poverty and violence. Interfering with healthy development, these circumstances can lead to further severe emotional and physical trauma. According to Shonkoff and Phillips, "Research shows that growing up in chronic poverty contributes directly to stress at a level that can affect adolescent health, brain development, and social and emotional well-being—a response known as toxic stress."⁵ At least one-third of black, Latino, and Native American children in America live in a household with an income below the poverty level.⁶

Just as adverse experiences add up and have long-reaching implications for children, the same is true for adults who have experienced trauma and feel marginalized, in part because of the intersection or overlap of these traumas and vulnerabilities that lead to marginalization. The intersectionality of racism, poverty, mental health stigma, incarceration, and issues of gender and/or sexuality, to name a few, can become an obstacle that seems insurmountable. For example, race alone can cause difficulties, but poverty and gender can exacerbate those challenges, creating new levels of self-protection to safely navigate systems to keep the family together.

We must critically evaluate how this intersectionality of vulnerabilities may influence how people view and interact with us. Many vulnerable parents have experienced struggles that go mostly unnoticed in society, making them feel powerless, possibly even invisible. This directly affects the way they view and interact with us.

The Historical Legacy of Our Practice

Whether we like it or not, we are part of the overall child-serving and protecting system that historically has had the power to separate parents from their children. Children have been and can still be removed from the home because of real or perceived inadequate parenting, substantiated abuse, neglect, and harmful dysfunction in the home. The shameful reality is that in the past, family separation was done with less thoughtfulness, and children of color were more likely to be separated from their homes.

As a helping professional, therefore, we can sometimes serve as a trigger for past individual or collective trauma. It's understandable, therefore, that a parent would feel defensive in this potentially threatening situation.

When feeling exhausted and overwhelmed, a parent needs a kind heart to turn to, but the real fear of being seen as incompetent can stand in the way. Shame may fuel parental reluctance to share struggles, because parents may expect to be harshly judged. This makes it hard to reach for help when the outcome could be your children being taken from your care. How a parent is treated and the messages they consistently hear based on their vulnerabilities inform how they navigate and manage systems.

We are obligated to arrive with a humble openness to hearing and understanding the intersection of the unique vulnerabilities present in each teen and parent we work with. It is an enormous sign of trust on their part to even be talking with us. Creating an environment of trust allows for honesty, as opposed to hides the difficulties they face.

On the Defense

Sometimes people show us the behavior they think we expect, for better or worse. Sometimes they behave as they think they must, even if it is not a reflection of who they truly are. It may be that a parent initially associates us with a past authority figure in their own life —someone who wrested power from them.

It is commendable for us to hold a baseline belief that each family has overcome and survived challenges that have made them stronger and unique as a family. When we scan a face sheet with that positive bias, particular phrases and descriptions of experiences will jump out and allow us to connect from a humble posture of curiosity. It will also help us understand particularly assertive stances. Because of the personal story or historical legacy just described, parents learn to assert control with social service professionals, sometimes needing to shift the blame to their adolescents. This defensive approach could prevent them from offering the supportive stance their adolescents would most benefit from and that they wished they could offer.

Assuring us that they set firm boundaries and have high expectations for their teen will prove to us that they are taking their parenting role seriously and doing their job. They have learned this protects their family. They are likely reacting to an extraordinary circumstance in a very normal way. When we genuinely see them in the best light, this defensive posture can be diminished and we are more likely to see how nurturing they can be.

Listen, Learn, and Humbly Support

Each parent has a profound survival story yet to be discovered by us. Families not only feel heard when we acknowledge these vulnerabilities but become empowered when we reframe these vulnerabilities as evidence of strength. Listening to and hearing their responses to some of the questions below can unlock endless possibilities for hope as their own story provides the framework for healing.

Drug and alcohol addiction is so overwhelming and claims so many lives. How did you manage to overcome this?

People don't always treat other people fairly. What's been your experience?

People who learn to survive these types of experiences in their childhood have tremendous strength. What do you think of that?

It seems like a lot of people in your past were always telling you what to do or telling you what's best. How did that feel?

It's so challenging to start parenting again after so many years. Where did you find the strength to take custody and the energy to be a parent to these kids?

I can't imagine what it feels like to have an agency tell you how to raise your kids. What gives you the courage to work with us?

Shame keeps secrets, while trust and love open doors to healing and connection.

Feelings of shame and powerlessness in the parent must be replaced with feelings of strength and hope. This happens when we humbly listen for parenting strengths and successes and reframe how the parent sees themselves and their teen. Parents are people with their own story and struggles. The first part of our job is to help the parent see their strengths and build parenting strategies on past successes. In this way, parents are empowered as the experts in their own lives and the lives of their children.

We hear a great deal about developing the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, or empathy. But we need to do more than develop empathy. We need humility. Our willingness to lay down our own biases and agenda displays humility. Seeking to understand manifests love that underpins true recovery work. When our support is unconditional, we extend grace. How we interact is not conditioned on how parents react or respond to us, nor is it conditioned on their attitude toward treatment. What we have to offer may even feel undeserved to parents. This is grace.

Approaching with humility and love can serve to create a more authentic connection, of course, with appropriate boundaries. After all, we want to support parents to do just the thing they are wired to do—to love their kids and support their goals through the regular expression of love and maintaining high expectations. Without the proper lens and void of an authentic connection, we cannot make the impact of guiding parents to lead through their strengths. It is important to recognize that self-reflective questions can build empathy for the parents we work with.

What are some things that I like about this parent?

What common ground do we share?

What are some qualities this parent has that may be a resource for a change?

For a professional-parent relationship to be effective, we must act as a partner or guide, even when we feel disrespected and challenged. Playing the role of expert or authority figure can elicit painful memories from the parent's own adolescence of navigating difficult experiences, when power was taken away and feelings of helplessness followed. By communicating with respect, understanding, warmth, and acceptance, we provide a corrective emotional experience.⁷ Through a corrective emotional experience, we respond to the parent in ways that are different from previous hurtful experiences they have had with others, possibly within any combination of their family of origin, foster care, school, and juvenile justice settings.

Asking well-rehearsed lists of questions about the problem and focusing on the nuances keep us in our comfort zone, but they fail to build trust and can prevent us from hearing what's most important to the parent. We must let the parent *guide us*. If we ask leading questions, we control the communication. If we let the parent's story unfold, the very telling of it will give us vital clues as to how we can best support a parent to love and support their child through proven strengths. While we have many strategies to offer parents, we do not hold the solutions. The motivations, goals, and plans for moving forward reside in the parent and teen—within their story. Allowed into the sanctuary of the inner workings of a family, we must enter in with humility, respect, and love for each family member. How do we do this?

Making Hope Real

A strength-based approach is only part of the equation. Positive thinking and a focus on strengths and past successes are important—but hope is better. There is something more a parent can look forward to, even

beyond their crisis situation. Hope-centered care seeks to understand how strengths developed in the midst of adversity. The parent's demonstrated strengths are part of the answer. Meaningful care doesn't rest in our own expert opinion but, rather, with the native resources of the parent. We partner with parents to see themselves as strong and resourceful as they identify specific qualities that have served them well in other difficult situations, restoring power and hope. The reframing of the story doesn't deny any of the difficult truth of the story, but it changes the parent's view of himself in the story. A story of hope sparks motivation in the parent and in us.

We ask...

What's your story?

Humbly listen, by laying aside any preformed judgments. Looking a parent in the eyes and hearing her story will create the foundation for support as she parents through her strengths.

What defines your family?

Through this definition, we can magnify the strengths through authentic validation.

What do you want for your family? What do you want for your child?

Through these dreams for their child, we can support parents to help their child set and achieve goals.

How can I support you to parent from this (your family vision)?

With stated goals, boundaries, and expectations set and communicated, the teen and entire family can function better.

*What relationships provide you with emotional supports? Where do you feel most accepted and loved?
What motivates you to attend our meetings?*

This parent may show up late or miss appointments, but in light of her adversity, she shows up and engages in the work of healing. In asking this question, rather than, "Why are you always late?" we can affirm and inspire as we understand her story and communicate that the way she has navigated past difficult experiences makes her the woman she is today.

*As a black man, I can't truly understand what it's like for you to go through this situation as a Latino woman.
Would you be comfortable sharing what that's like for you?*

As a white woman, I don't have any idea what it takes for you to navigate these situations as a black man. Can you tell me about that?

We strive to understand, as best we can, what these parents experience as they try to navigate to a solution.

*What cultural [and/or spiritual] beliefs [and/or practices] have helped you overcome challenges in the past?
How do these help you in everyday life?*

We are obligated to listen for, respect, and include spiritual beliefs and commitments when we consider the well-being of a parent who has experienced trauma. If we ignore this part of the story, we run the risk of ignoring a vital source of strength and empowerment. Exhibiting true cultural humility, we should encourage worship, prayer, and meditation when it is what has meaning to the family, along with other identified strategies for working through a problem to resolution with evidence-based practices.

Thanks for your honesty; you really shared a lot. I value your trust and I see your love for your child. Of everything you shared, what are you motivated to work on right now?

(This display of kindness in a vulnerable situation will go a long way in developing trust.)

What would make this experience of working together worthwhile?

Putting the parent into the driver's seat is an offer of compassionate support in humility and love. Compassion leads to action.

How did you see yourself parenting before you had children?

This is another chance for us to listen while withholding judgment.

What have you done in the past to help you through this?

We articulate our confidence in their parenting abilities in this present situation. Acknowledging what the parent does well, we vocalize affirmation. We ourselves love to hear, "Well done!" Comment in the moment and a parent's face will light up. When future tough situations arise, your voice will resound in that parent's mind and heart—affirmation is a motivator.

What would you like to see happen with your family instead of what's happening right now?

This question raises expectation for change; it conveys, "I believe you can do this." Our privilege is to plant seeds of change.

I know the behaviors of your teen are frustrating, so what behaviors would you like to see from your teen instead?

Affirmation creates a safe and secure atmosphere. Affirmation is more than simply being positive. We highlight the parent's good intentions and validate their desires for their teen.

Suppose your child miraculously began to behave the way you wanted her to; what part do you think you would have played in that change? What would you have done to make that happen?

This speaks powerfully, delivering the message, "You matter in this solution."

Suppose this difficulty wasn't happening; what kind of parent would you be right now?

This will give us a snapshot of the parent for who he is, not a sum of behaviors and circumstances.

How do you envision your child's life 10 or 20 years from now?

Asking this question puts the focus on the future. It allows hope for change as it creates a space for setting goals and for affirming the parent's continued role in her teen's healthy development into an adult who is connected to loved ones and society with purpose and meaning for their lives.

Pulling It Together

We meet people where they are, with all their strengths, weaknesses, resolved and unresolved trauma, ingrained reactions and responses, and myriad self-narratives. We protect children by coming alongside parents to listen, hear, and facilitate strength-based approaches and solutions to persistent issues. Misbehaviors, or behaviors that signal something is amiss, allow a child to send up an SOS in the only way they know how at that time—“See me, hear me, pay attention to me, and help me navigate this.” By showing up with a humble and loving stance, we can help parents and kids work toward flourishing. Keeping expectations high means we all want more, more than just getting by—we offer developmentally appropriate protective strategies with respect and guidance based on the parent’s past successes.

From:

“Engaging Parents Who Have Experienced Trauma and Marginalization in a Strengths-based Partnership”, Kirsten Freitag Murray with Michael Ryan, LPC. Reaching Teens: Strength-Based Communication Strategies to Build Resilience and Support Healthy Adolescent Development, Ginsburg, Kenneth MD Editor, Second Edition; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020.