

“As the World Turns”

Have you noticed periods of time when you couldn't keep track of who your children's friends are? Are you amazed at how quickly relationships form, end, and re-form? Are you concerned about the “Hollywood” pace and nature of your children's' social lives? Do you think your son/daughter is too quick to magnify and distort anything they hear—either from you or their peers?

Adolescence is a time of heightened insecurities and self-consciousness. It also happens to be a time of inflated drama. Both of these qualities can be frustrating for parents and teachers, yet they also serve important long-term functions for adolescents.

Exaggerated reactions, heightened sensitivity to criticism, becoming obsessively involved in new causes one month and losing interest the next, huge (and frequent) swings between idolization and hatred, members moving in and out of peer groups, intense competition between friends, revenge fantasies, profound reactions of hurt, mortification, anger—all examples of the ways kids exaggerate experiences. But these exaggerated experiences help children learn. Some of the important things they are learning are: coping skills, boundaries, trust, assertiveness, loyalty, self-worth, and a generalized codes of ethical and moral conduct.

Often, we cannot find the limit of appropriate behavior unless the line is crossed. We cannot learn the scope of a rule until it is broken. We cannot truly know and incorporate a code of moral conduct until it is violated. The resulting guilt, shame, remorse, regret, and awkwardness help reinforce the lessons learned.

Parents are often puzzled when their child is involved in a crushingly hurtful experience (as either the victim or the perpetrator) that seems to come out of the blue. Even best friends can act in ways that are shockingly rude, disrespectful, or mean. Experiences are often exaggerated so that they can be understood and incorporated. Behaviors and relationships are "practiced." Exaggerated actions and reactions make the underlying issues clearer, allowing children to explore and "agree" on what is (and is not) acceptable. Paradoxically, this helps kids develop boundaries and trust, clarifies expectations and codes of behavior, and prepares them for adult relationships. Self-initiated conflict and drama also provide the opportunity for kids to learn emotional coping skills as well as mediation and resolution skills. Resolving problems is a highly rewarding and emotional experience. People of all ages (but especially adolescents) often start fights in order to gain the skills, reassurance and satisfaction of making up.

If you watch carefully, the daily “soap operas” at home and at school will reveal themselves as evidence of on-going development and maturation. Parents and teachers have the responsibility to address negative behaviors, but also have the opportunity to understand and discuss those behaviors within the larger context of “lessons learned.”