

## **A SIGH OF BELIEF: HELPING PARENTS TO RAISE THEIR CONFIDENCE**

**Presented by Robert J. Ackerman, Ph.D.**

This presentation examined the conditions and behaviors that destroy and undermine confidence in parents, and discussed techniques to build or restore it. It stressed the importance of parental confidence in successfully supporting the education of their children as well as supporting the educators who work with their children.

It is difficult for many parents to know where they stand as parents. They might wonder how they can be good at their jobs, professional in their interactions with other adults, composed in crises that are outside of their families, but constantly feel tested and frustrated dealing with their children. Parents want the best for their children, but are not sure of the best way to teach their children. It is critical to raise and maintain parents' confidence in their roles as parents. It is not as important to focus on strategies for handling children, but rather on how to raise parents' confidence in order to more effectively be a parent who feels secure rather than one filled with doubt.

### **DIFFICULTIES OF BEING A PARENT TODAY**

Today's parents fill many roles, and they can feel very good about themselves as they successfully fill certain roles that are outside the family. A parent might be very successful at work; he or she is liked and respected as a fully functioning adult; he or she has enough money, knows what he or she is doing, and feels pretty good. Their self-confidence is high.

Then their teenager doesn't respond to them, or complains about something in the house, slams the door, states they are going to stay overnight in another home, and claims his or her parents embarrass them in front of everyone and they don't trust them. Suddenly something has changed internally within the parent. The parent's self-confidence is gone. The teenager hasn't changed; it is the parent who has changed.

Bookstores have hundreds of parenting books, but do those books really have anything to do with parenting. Those books are all about kids, not about parents. They tell how to teach kids

something or how to overcome a supposed defect in a kid. But they do not deal with what is going on with the parents -- how the parent is feeling, what are their hopes, their aspirations, their dreams, their doubts. The books do not cover the feelings engendered when, on one hand, a parent is supposed to spend time with this child and, on the other hand, they are supposed to be able to maintain the health, the wealth, the education, and the housing of his or her child. A parent is supposed to love his child, but is left often exhausted.

### ***PARENTS MUST LEARN TO TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES***

Parents who feel good about themselves are able to take care of themselves. Parents spend so much time trying to figure how to take care of their children that they never realize the prerequisite for that is to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy. The exhausted parent can only do so much.

### ***PARENTS MUST ACCEPT THEIR PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES***

There are now a large number of programs in this country for children. There are more programs for children today than there were ten years ago, and five years from now there will be even more. Many people in communities have worked very hard to develop programs for kids and they have done so with great pride. But the reason there are many programs for children is that there are too many adults in this country who will not accept their parental responsibilities. If adults would accept their responsibilities, we would not need institutions to do what families should be doing.

Children and teenagers have not changed much over the years. If children are allowed to do what they want to do, they will do just that. It is not that children have changed; instead, both the family structure and the society have changed dramatically.

### ***EXPECTATIONS OF CHILDREN MUST BE CLEAR***

Years ago, if a parent told a child to do something, he or she usually did it. They did it because of many reasons; they did not know any better; they were punished if they did not do it; respect for their parents, and they perceived that compliance was expected. In general, they complied because there was a good outcome if they obeyed or a negative outcome if they didn't.

They perceived very clearly where they thought their parents stood. Even if the parents were faking it, there was no doubt about what the children perceived about the parent. Additionally, this provided structure for the children to know where they stood as well.

### ***PARENTS MUST BE LEADERS***

Families that have problems, especially those with teenagers, often experience the roles of parent and child becoming blurred. The family situation is a constant struggle of who really is in charge. In addition, parents who mean well often are not parenting by leadership. They are not parenting positively, by their beliefs or the direction they want to go. Instead, what is driving them is a negative force. They are parenting by default. Instead of positively leading the child toward what they think the child should do, they are so fearful of ruining their children by not doing something, that they act out of fear and doubt. This is parenting by default, not by positive leadership.

### ***PARENTS NEED SELF-CONFIDENCE***

As mentioned earlier, in a bookstore, you can find many books supposedly on parenting. Some of these books are titled *Your Hyper-Active Child; A Parents guide to ADD; Raising Self-Reliant Children, The Strong Willed Child, Raising a Thinking Child, Raising Your Spiritual Child, Helping Your Child Cope with Divorce, Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong, Tough Love, The Difficult Child, How to Talk so Kids Can Learn, Your Child's Self-Esteem, Touch Points For Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development, Teaching Your Kids to Care, Solve Your Child's Sleep Pattern Problems, Toilet Training in Less than a Day, and Normal Children Have Problems Too, How Parents Can Help and Understand.*

There are many strategies to help parents raise their children, but it is self-confidence, not strategy, that really allows parents to be successful. Even without many strategies, if parents believe what they are doing is right, and both parents agree about what is best for their family, then they will be successful as parents. No technique will work in the hands of a parent who lacks self-confidence. Eventually the child knows the absence and the child plays on it.

The opposite of confidence is insecurity and doubt. Parents today have a lot of doubt about their abilities. It is to be expected that there is always some doubt, insecurity and hopefulness about doing the right thing found in all parents. But the tougher the situation with a difficult child, the more parents need confidence. The older the children get, the more parents need confidence. The closer a child is to being an adolescent, the more parents need confidence.

### **CULTURAL CHANGES OVER THE PAST THIRTY YEARS**

A positive change in parenting is that more parents today have more involvement with their children than at any time in history. Parents are more emotionally involved with their children, and they are aware that childhood can be painful. Unfortunately, some parents have tried to protect their kids from all childhood pain. Also, one of the reasons we have so many problems with kids is that we put them into activities such as sports or academic pursuits when they are too young. In many ways we are creating excessive stress for children.

All children have stress in their lives. For example, the number one stress felt by American elementary school students is being called on to read aloud. That hasn't changed since we were children. But, in addition, they have concerns about safety and violence. Forty-three percent of children in this country's public schools will not use the bathrooms for fear of violence. Circumstances for children have changed and parents, more than ever, must be involved in their children's lives. This does not mean that children should not have some responsibility and accountability for their behaviors.

In this country, the cultural expectation is that the main roles of adolescents are to show up and to be consumers. An example is parental involvement in high school proms. Parents are doing all the decorating, they are making all the arrangements, they are footing the bill, and they are doing everything. The only thing the teen has to do is show up. This does not do teenagers a favor. If their job is just to show up, when they do show up, they expect something for it. They are contributing nothing. They have no investment in it. There is an attitude that they are owed this. What is it that we are teaching our children when we do everything for them?

These are examples of changes that have been gradually taking place. Children have inherited these gradual changes. These have been thirty-year changes. Children have not changed so much; instead, adults in this country have not stood up. Teenagers need to see their parents and other adults standing up for the right thing. And the community needs to stand up with the parent. If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes that same village to support a parent. What has been lost in this country is a sense of community. If the healthiest family in the world is put into a broken down community, they are going to barely be able to hold on. But if a family with a lot of trouble and a lot of problems is put into a healthy community, there are many offsetting factors. Again it is the adults that make the difference.

Our communities have lost a collective sense of identity. A collective sense of identity is an understanding among most adults of what was expected from kids. This expectation was conveyed to kids in a community. Most people understood what it meant to respect somebody, what behavior was allowed, and what was not. Children knew what was approved and disapproved behaviors because of parameters set and maintained by adults and then conveyed to children. Children also expected that adults, even if they were not related, would say something if their behavior was not what was expected. Adults have lost their confidence. Once adults lost their confidence, they stopped saying anything about poor behavior, and the children do whatever they want.

One of the results is that, in the eyes of many adolescents, adults have now become irrelevant. When an adult is present, they do not alter their gestures, their sayings, their conversations, or their topics. Years ago, teens might have said the very same things, but they certainly didn't say them in front of everybody. In the past, a teen was very much aware of an adult's presence and also aware of an adult's expectations. In addition, that teen was aware of the adult's confidence to speak up as needed.

The point is that in order to help teenagers, we must help parents and other adults feel relevant. It is important to respond to poor behavior. Silence is perceived as condoning, or at least tolerating, that behavior.

Teenagers often do not know what it means to be a member of their family, what their family believes, and what their family expects from them. They don't know what their family won't stand for, or what they will or won't tolerate. The teen can not say what beliefs his family has, what is their religion or values or rituals. If a teen does know those things, they are getting it from their parent or parents; they have been shown what is acceptable in their family home. If teenagers can not say what their family stands for, they may believe their family does not care, and that can be a cause of a teenager's anger.

### **LOW CONFIDENT PARENTS**

There are several indicators of parents with low confidence. Parents with low confidence let their children get by with rude or impolite behavior because they are upset and it is inconvenient to be courteous. They let their child do something wrong because they are afraid to speak up. Some parents allow their children to avoid or withdraw from activities because of complaints that they are too hard or not fun. Or they constantly give their children money or buy things for them because that is what they want. When children neglect their chores and responsibilities, low confident parents usually do the chores for them while loudly complaining about it. That might be because it's easier, it will only take a minute or two, or because the parents are exhausted, and not remembering to give themselves self-care. Children often talk low confident parents out of disciplinary measures they have assigned. And low confident parents might automatically replace property that a child damages or loses through personal negligence, because the child is upset. These parents often intercede on their child's behalf when he or she gets into trouble by misbehaving. Low confident parents sometimes cross over the line from supporting their child in a project, or meeting a responsibility, to doing it for him or her. And they are willing to stretch ethical boundaries to help keep their child happy.

### ***PARENTAL SELF-CARE***

Parents need to learn to provide some self-care. Many times parents do not engage in self-care by enforcing what their boundaries or expectations are because they are tired. Kids will really, really, really wear you down. An example of providing self-care is shown by this story from when our oldest son was about 15.

One day I made a very routine request of him. I said, "Take out the garbage, please." He didn't reply. He just went over and did the adolescent shuffle. That night as I was getting ready to go to bed, I went around the house checking the lights and turning things off. I opened the door to the garage to check to make sure the garage doors were down. And when I opened the door, I saw the trash sitting on the top step. Now, it is three steps to the floor of the garage. At the bottom of the third step on the right hand side is the trashcan. It would have taken me only a couple of seconds to pick up the trash and put it in the garbage can, but I thought, "This is one of those times that I can use self-care. I should invest a little in myself instead of letting him get away with it." Even though it was a little after midnight, I thought, "Let us not deprive this youth of this learning experience that is about to occur." So I went up stairs and went to his room where he was sleeping. It was dark and I flipped on the overhead light. Right away my self-esteem started to improve immensely. I went over to him and he said, "What?" I said, "What did you do with the garbage?" He said, "I took it out." And I said, "Get out of bed, go downstairs, go open up the garage door, be careful not to trip, pick up the trash, walk down three steps and on your right-hand side there are two big green things that have been part of the family for years, take the lid off one, put the garbage in, put the lid back on, turn around, walk up the steps, turn out the garage light, close the garage door." "You mean, now?" "Yes, I'll wait."

Now, it might sound facetious, but I never had to tell him again where the garbage went. And I did not have to worry the next day about talking to him about being irresponsible.

### ***RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN***

Children are relatively resilient and, to a certain extent, children are rejection-proof. For example, if a child asks for something and the parent says "No," the child asks again. If the child asks for something nineteen times, and nineteen times the parent says "No," and the 20<sup>th</sup> time the parent says "Well maybe," the child hears "Yes." The child doesn't need a support group to deal with self-esteem because they have been rejected nineteen times. That is irrelevant to them. They were only looking for the "Yes." They do not care about the nineteen rejections.

Parents can be so afraid of being rejected by their children that they are afraid of having their own boundaries. Rule Number One if you have a teenager is "Don't take it personally." That is very hard to do, especially if dealing with an angry teenager. Parents need to remember that the teenager does not know why he or she is angry. In fact, they do not think that they are angry; they think they are being themselves.

Parents who are still trying to do everything for their child because they are afraid of being rejected should realize that, in many cases, the teenager has already rejected the advice of the parent, the guidance of the parent, and everything what the parent expects. It is easy to reject people when they do not stand up, when they do not stand for something. It is almost effortless. It was Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, “If you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.” That is excellent parenting advice. When we produce low confidence parents, we are probably producing low confidence children without realizing it.

### **PARENTAL PARADOXICAL DILEMMAS**

Parents put themselves into many paradoxical dilemmas. The following are some examples.

#### ***EXPECTING CHILDREN TO SAY NO WHEN THEY HAVE NEVER HEARD NO***

It is not sensible to expect this generation of adolescents to say “No” to drugs when they have never heard “No.” They don’t hear “No” to many of their requests, like seeing a rated movie, buying a particular CD, or hanging around with a particular crowd. They have not heard, “No, you are going to stay home because you have to do work” or “No, because it is one of our rules.”

Research has shown that the most common complaint from parents in this country is not about kids; it is about other parents who let their children do things that they should not be doing. This makes it even more difficult to say “No.” If there is consistency within the family about family rules, the children are less likely to complain. The values of the family must be consistently followed. This would be much easier if we had more consistency among parents about appropriate behaviors, their own and their children’s.

#### ***MICRO-MANAGED CHILDREN CANNOT MANAGE FOR THEMSELVES***

Many children are micro-managed. These are the children whose parent has stepped in and done everything for them. They are so concerned that their child gets everything, they are overly managing everything about their child. Then they wonder why their child can’t manage to

do anything for himself or herself. A few years ago, the first group of micro-managed adolescents entered college in the United States. Many professors and staff in the United States reported that it was the parents that drove everyone crazy. The parents called to make schedules, to know why something happened, or to explain why their child could not get up in time for an early class. The parents moved everything into the dormitories. Some parents even came to the college three days early to set up the whole room because the student wanted to go do something else.

We are not doing these micro-managed young people any favors. They can only learn by being allowed to do things for themselves, and by sometimes failing. If parents have never allowed a child the feeling of not getting what they want, if they have never allowed them to sometimes do their best and fail when it still wasn't enough, then when they are beyond family and out in the world trying to make it on their own, people are not going to care, and the grown child will get torn up. It is very difficult for us physically and emotionally to sit on our hands and let them struggle, but it is the way to avoid raising a dependent person.

Sometimes parents must let their children struggle even if it is painful. Parents' pain over their child's situation is often greater than the child's pain. The issue is often really the parents' pain. Teenagers often say, "If they don't want me to do it why don't they just tell me no." It doesn't work all the time but at least the teen knows where the parent stands. Many teens do not know where their parents stand. There is too much negotiation going on. Parents need to have a strong identity in order for their children to have an identity. By helping too much, parents can deprive the children of the opportunity to learn. Some parents want to teach their children everything, but a lesson. Some things they need to learn on their own.

### ***KEEPING CHILDREN BUSY AND FILLING UP THEIR TIME IS NOT THE SAME AS FULFILLING PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES***

Just because a parent structures all of a child's free time, this does not mean that much parenting has occurred. It only means that you have a very busy child. In fact, it can lead to even less time spent together for a parent and child. For example, some parents plan every week of their child's summer, thinking they are fulfilling their parenting responsibilities. If there is

some boredom in the child's life, there is room for some creativity. Too much structured time stifles creativity and develops exhausted kids.

### ***WHEN CHILDREN GO OUT OF BOUNDS, DON'T CHASE THEM***

When children go out of bounds of acceptable behavior, do not chase them. Someone needs to be stable. This is particularly important for adolescents. When children become adolescents, they can start to go a direction different from their family. They want to go outside those bounds to test the waters, and they may do things that are not good choices. The best thing to do is to stay the course, to stay with your values, to know what you stand for and what you believe in. The teenager is experimenting and needs stability at home. Family is home base. It is a place of safety and security.

### **STRATEGIES FOR RAISING CONFIDENCE AS A PARENT**

#### ***A. BE COMFORTABLE BEING IN CHARGE***

Parents need to learn to feel comfortable being in charge. One of the results of the 1960's was that it became common in this country to challenge authority. So many people have torn authority down that now when parents are in a position of being in charge, they feel uncomfortable with it. They do not want to make those tough decisions.

#### ***B. IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT TO TEACH***

Parents must identify what they want to teach. It is very important to realize that parents are their kids' teachers. They are their first teachers. They are their last teachers. Parents should figure out ten things they want to teach their children, and then figure out how they want to teach them. If they want their child to be honest, then they must consider how to teach honesty. Parents must ask themselves, "What would I want my children to learn from me? What did I learn from my parent?" In one of my books, *Son and Sons*, I listed ten things I hope that I will be able to teach my children. They are in no order of significance:

1. Be fair to yourself and others
2. Respect people
3. Listen to your coach, others can see things that you can't
4. Learn to play

5. Find a job but find what you like to do first
6. Believe in God and believe in yourself
7. Love your family, respect your spouse, and enjoy your children
8. Do what is right, not what is popular
9. Open presents on Christmas morning; it is more fun
10. I love you.

### ***C. LEARN ABOUT HUMAN DEVELOPMENT***

When a parent has decided he knows what he wants to teach, if he is fortunate enough to have a partner or another parent, the two of you must agree on what you are trying to do. It helps to learn about human development. Read those books that talk about kids, so you know what to expect and what not to expect. Learning about human development helps you to understand the various developmental stages of your children. You can learn what is age appropriate for your children, which will help you when making decisions about them.

### ***D. LEARN ABOUT YOUR CHILDREN'S PROBLEMS***

Parents must learn what problems their children face in the world. For example, if you are worried about your children and drugs, and you want to talk to your children, first you should go out and learn about the subject. If you are uncomfortable about talking to kids about sex, you need to know what is going on, in order to be able to tell them. If there are other problems in the community, parents must become knowledgeable about them. Learn about your children's problems because if you don't talk with them, someone else will. You may not like what they are hearing from others.

### ***E. KNOW WHEN AND HOW TO GET HELP***

Parents must know when and how to get help. This is critical for raising confidence. Parents need to know what help is available in their community. They need to talk with other parents about what is going on. They should plan ahead – if we do run into this situation, what would we do? Communicating with other parents is very important.

## ***F. LEARN HOW TO PARENT TOGETHER***

If there are two parents, they must learn how to work together to guide their children. Even if parents no longer live together, or they were never married, or they are divorced, even if they are spouses no more, they are parents forever. They must work out some way to parent without the spouse relationship contaminating it. That is called respect.

Parents need to be on the same sheet of music for their children. It is important to come across as a team to your children.

## ***G. LEARN HOW TO SAY, “NO”***

Learning to say “No” is a two way street. It doesn’t mean just to the kids. It means to yourself as well. Saying no to too many demands can simultaneously mean you are saying yes to the things that you would really like to do.

## ***H. LEARN WHEN AND HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF***

This is important, particularly with teenagers. Some teenagers have gone in directions that parents no longer can identify with or control. These teens are not ready to change, and they can be very painful to live to around. At that point, it is important to know how parents can protect themselves. In some cases this means how to be safe physically, as well as how not to get emotionally beat up all the time and how not to get drawn into conversations that are not helpful. Some teenagers seem born to argue. They want their parents to argue. The teen wants to be angry with a parent because that anger justifies their behavior to themselves. Some teens can become very intimidating and create fear in parents.

## ***I. RELY ON COMMON SENSE***

Parent need to rely on common sense. Make a valid judgement, and stick with it. It seems very simple, but many parents lose their confidence because they start to make things too complex. They overly process because they are afraid of making decisions. These parents are not just afraid of making decisions; they are afraid of their children. Being afraid to upset your child is being afraid of your child, and that means being afraid to be a parent. Parents need respect from counselors and educators. They need help identifying how they are going to support each

other to work out problems with their children. Parents need to be a team. Being a team builds confidence, and being part of a team raises parents' level of confidence to be able to ask for help.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY FAMILY**

- 1) Develops and maintains positive rituals
- 2) Possesses a sense of order and direction
- 3) Teaches a sense of right and wrong
- 4) Has a sense of spirituality
- 5) Teaches tolerance of others
- 6) Teaches respect
- 7) Affirms and supports its members
- 8) Spends time together and has a healthy sense of humor
- 9) Is flexible during trying times
- 10) Knows when to ask for help
- 11) Becomes part of the community
- 12) Interacts positively as a group

## **TIPS FOR PARENTS OF TEENS**

- 1) Let your child be a child. Don't push your young adolescent or let others influence him or her to grow up too quickly.
- 2) Make your home a place where your teen feels she or he belongs.
- 3) Respect your teen's need for privacy and separation, but expect some level of commitment and involvement in the family.
- 4) Make your home a place where your teen's friends feel welcome.
- 5) Get to know the parents of your teen's friends.
- 6) Make your teen's best friend your best friend.
- 7) Keep your focus on safe behaviors and moral values.
- 8) Know the warning signs of unsafe behaviors.
- 9) Negotiate mutually acceptable limits with your teen.
- 10) Do not abdicate your parental authority.
- 11) Be available.
- 12) Be a good listener. Keep the lines of communication open even when your teen doesn't want to talk or is disrespectful. Keep the door open on any subject.
- 13) Treat your teenager as you would your adult friends, but don't try to be his or her friend.
- 14) Don't take it personally.

### **About the Presenter.**

Robert J. Ackerman, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Mid-Atlantic Addiction Training Institute at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and a Fulbright Scholar. He is a co-founder of the National Association for Children of Alcoholics.

As an author he has published numerous articles and research finding and is best know for writing the first book in the United States on children of alcoholics in 1978. Eleven books later, many television appearances, and countless speaking engagements he has become internationally know for his work with families and children of all ages. His books have been translated into several languages including Spanish, German, Finnish and Chinese.

He has served on many advisory boards and has worked with the National Institute of Mental Health, National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse and the U.S. Department of Education. He served on the Governor's Task Forces in Colorado and Michigan.

He is the recipient of many awards including the Distinguished Alumni Award from Western Michigan University and the 1995 Gooderham Award from his work in alcohol and drug abuse. He is a veteran of numerous TV appearances and his work has been featured on CNN Headline News, the Today Show, USA Today newspaper and Newsweek Magazine.

### **Contact Information:**

Robert Ackerman, Ph.D., Director  
Mid-Atlantic Addiction Training Institute  
1098 Oakland Ave.  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705  
Telephone (724) 357-4405

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