



## *Slowing Things Down:* **Partnering with Parents During Adolescent Struggles**

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A few years ago, my daughter was home from college and, for reasons I didn't understand, she was upset. When I say upset, I mean the kind of upset children work years to perfect. The kind that grabs the undivided attention of their parents. In this case, it included stomping around the house, slamming doors; blaming me, her father, her sister, the dog for every little thing out of place; and yelling about things that happened a week ago. In my mind, there were so many things wrong with her behavior: the words she used, the way she said them, her aggressive attitude. I felt the familiar strong urge to put her in her place and shut her down. My chest felt tight. I felt defensive and angry, and hidden underneath the anger was the well-known pain of watching my child struggle and suffer.

This summer I had the opportunity to attend a workshop given by Dr. Robert Brooks called *The Power of Mindsets: Promoting Positive School Climates, Motivation and Resilience in Students*. I was attending the workshop as professional development for my job as an administrator at Hutchison. During the workshop, Brooks (2018) introduced psychologist Julius Segal's concept



of a “charismatic adult” defined as “someone from whom a child gathers strength.” Segal’s research on resilience and childhood adversity pointed to the existence of a charismatic adult in the lives of those who showed resilience. Wow! I thought. *Someone from whom a child gathers strength. I want children to ‘gather strength’ from me! I’d love to be that person to my students!*

The more I thought about it, I realized most educators want to be a charismatic adult in the lives of their students. I’m sure most parents would like to be a charismatic adult in the lives of their own children. The problem is we as educators can get lost and confused along the way. And the parents of our students must contend with an increasing amount of anxiety and confusion. Our experience of our own parents and teachers in childhood and myriad experiences since then often influence our behavior as adults in relationship to the children in our lives. Perhaps one of the most difficult parts of working with adolescents is learning to continue to move toward the things we value most about being teachers when things get hard. And, things do get hard!

Adolescence is an amazing time of change and newness. As neuropsychologist, Daniel J. Siegal (2013), wrote in *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, “From around age twelve to age twenty-four, there is a burst of growth and maturation taking place as never before seen in our lives” (p. 6). As a result, it can be a scary and uncertain time for teens and their parents. For most human beings, feeling uncertainty lies somewhere between uncomfortable and unbearable. And for most parents, watching

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their child endure a hard time is something to be resisted, and they often move heaven and earth to avoid it. And so parents withdraw from their child’s suffering in any way they can. They yell at their kids about their behavior. They move in, take control, and try to fix. They try to talk their children out of their feelings because these feelings make parents uncomfortable. I’ve done all these things in my own parenting.

But what if, as psychologist Kelly Wilson and Troy DuFrene (2008) write in *Mindfulness for Two*, “Withdrawing from the suffering entails withdrawing from the sufferer also” (p. 8)? No one, teacher or parent, wants to abandon children in their time of need. And yet, everything in us wants the difficulty to end. We are at a crossroads in these tiny everyday moments with kids. The questions I often find myself asking is how do I build my tolerance of this confusing, conflicted uncomfortableness? How can I help other parents? What can I do that makes any sense at all?

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In their book, *Things Might Go Terribly, Horribly Wrong: A Guide to Life Liberated from Anxiety*, Wilson & DuFrene (2010) suggest that when things feel out of control, we should slow down, pay attention, and choose our next behavior instead of just reacting. They write, “Whatever you’re doing, slow down. Silly slow. Comically slow. Slur your words. Pretend you’re a sloth. Whatever it takes, go really, really slow” (p. 152).

I had read the lines in Wilson & DuFrene’s book the day before my daughter had her blow up, and the words, *Slow down. Slow down. Whatever it takes, slow down* kept going through my mind. So, I did. I slowed down. I just sat in the kitchen and let her rant without interruption. As the anger and defensiveness moved through me, I felt

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anxiety and concern for her future. *How can she have healthy relationships in her future, if she blows up like this?* I felt anger, *I didn’t raise her to be this disrespectful!* I felt guilt, *It must be my fault! I’m not a good mother.* I wanted it to stop! I wanted her to stop!

But instead, I just slowed it down to a crawl, sat still in the kitchen with all my uncomfortable feelings and righteous thoughts and listened until she stopped and began to cry. Only then did I find the compassion I needed, we both needed, to meet what was happening inside of her. I asked her to sit down and tell me what was going on. When she started to ramp up again about all the things she had been screaming about, I asked her in the calmest voice I could muster to slow down. To my surprise she did. And she told me about the things bothering her: her fears about her future and panic in the face of uncertainty. The details didn’t matter, I knew those feelings myself, intimately. And, they hurt—a lot. So, I sat with her as she felt them. I didn’t take them from her or feel them for her. She moved through them to the other side on her own, and I was there the whole time to help her feel safe. And it was very hard for me.

There is a concept in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, a psychological intervention, called psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility employs mindfulness and acceptance strategies combined with behavioral strategies to help us do hard things



in the service of those things that give our lives value and meaning (Hayes, n.d.). Being a charismatic adult in the lives of our students and children is something that gives our lives deep meaning. Why? For me, it's because I value the connection, love, and sense of purpose living in this way brings to my life.

In my role as Upper School Assistant Head, much of my contact with parents involves their daughter struggling in some way. Whether we are discussing her academic, behavioral, or relational struggles, parents are often looking for guidance. At Hutchison, our approach is to partner with parents recognizing the inherent difficulty and uncertainty of parenting adolescents. We help parents slow things down. We share with them what we value about educating their daughter, including what we want for her long term and how we hope to walk through each difficulty, keeping these values and hopes in mind. We help parents verbalize what they value and want for their daughter and discuss how we can partner together throughout her time in upper school. While there are some non-negotiables in terms of behaviors and some behaviors require consequences, we are very intentional about how we approach each interaction and deliver each consequence.

When my daughter was home those few years ago, I hadn't yet been introduced to Segal's concept of a charismatic adult. I was just beginning to consistently

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practice mindfulness and to understand the importance of being able to weather my own internal storms in the service of value and meaning in my relationships. But that experience with her has remained the one I go back to repeatedly in my mind when things get hard in my relationships, especially with the students in my life. It's the experience I call to mind when helping other parents. Can we slow down, pay attention, and ask ourselves, "In this moment, am I being someone from whom she gathers strength, or am I just doing whatever I can to feel better?"

We won't always get this right. But if we understand what we value about being educators and partner with parents to identify our shared values, we'll know the direction we'd like to be heading and can work towards helping parents cultivate the willingness to experience and tolerate the uncomfortable thoughts and emotions that get in the way. ●

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## Resources

Brooks, Robert (2018) *The Power of Mindsets: Promoting Positive School Climates, Motivation and Resilience in Students*. Learning and the Brain Conference, 9-13 July 2018, Boston University, Boston, MA. Presentation.

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