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The Fight for Autism Awareness

Candyland

Why Is It So Hard to 'Say No' to Our Teens with Special Needs?

By Esther B. Hess, Ph.D.

Underlying Parental Struggles and Conflicts Associated
with Raising an Adolescent with Challenges



Esther Hess enjoying her work with a young client.

John and Elizabeth have two children. Stacey is their (neuro) typical 16-year-old daughter. She is an honor student at the local private school that she attends, a cheerleader and, everyone agrees, on the fast track to be admitted to the Ivy League school of her choice. Her brother, David, is 14 years old and was diagnosed with a mild form of autism at the age of 3 years. He attends a school that specializes in children with spectrum disorders, and his parents hope that, one day, his obsession with computers may be able to be translated into some kind of a job where he might achieve a level of self-sufficiency.

While there are obvious developmental differences between these two siblings, the thrust of this article is about how John and Elizabeth struggle in their attempts to discipline their autistic teenager. When David was young, his behaviors and misbehaviors reflected his struggles with self-regulation. "It seemed like it took him forever to be toilet-trained," recalls his mother. "I used to get so frustrated when he would mess in his pants at 6 or 7 years of age, but I figured he really couldn't help it. So, other than cleaning up his poop, I never really talked to him about it or scolded him or anything. Lucky for us, he finally got the hang of it when he was about 8 years old."

As David grew, so did his behavior problems. "It is Dad's job to get both of the children up and ready to go in the morning. Some mornings, if not most mornings, are a challenge. Both Stacey and David have a curfew at night: television, stereo and computer off by 9:30 p.m. We have to get out of the house by 7 a.m. to get everyone

what a parent is supposed to do, but part of me feels like he really doesn't understand time concepts and part of me knows that the computer is his only real lifeline to the world. I hate cutting off something that feels so important to him."

Parenting under the best of circumstances comes replete with feelings of uncertainty, guilt and frustration. These experiences are magnified when a parent is dealing with a child with various cognitive and/or neuropsychological challenges. But there are multiple reasons why parents have difficulty saying 'no' to their teen with special needs.

As suggested, many parents feel bad for their child with challenges. They excuse grievous acting-out behavior because their child has such a hard life as it is that they don't want to add the burden of discipline to the myriad amount of tasks that their son or daughter struggle with daily. Then there are doses of reality to contend with. The dysregulation that often accompanies a diagnosis of autism or

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to school and work on time; if the kids stay up too late at night, we all have to deal with the fallout in the morning."

"Stacey understands that if she makes us late in the morning, then the next night there are consequences - she'll be grounded for the weekend, or she won't get car privileges. David is another story. I just don't have the heart to punish him when he stays up all night playing on his computer. I've even come into his room and, every once in a while, he'll let me play a game with him. I feel like that's our 'buddy time.' It's silly, I know, and not a real good example of

developmental delay can cause children to overreact in a moment's notice. Many parents already feel overburdened by the demands of their child's disorder and are reluctant, especially if they are out in public, to draw unwanted attention to their situation by challenging their child's wayward behaviors.

Elizabeth recounted one especially painful episode when she had to remove David from a shopping center: "I was literally dragging my son kicking and screaming out of the bookstore because he had previously been running up and down the aisles crashing into people.

In the midst of all of the turmoil, the manager came up to us and asked my son if he knew who I was and whether or not I was hurting him!"

There is also the underlying concern that many parents have that they somehow caused their child's developmental delay, either because of hereditary factors or because they did or did not do something during the pregnancy (over- or under-exercised, drank one too many glasses of wine, etc.). These guilty accusations can be all the more harmful because occasionally there are grains of truth in the blame.

Then there are less obvious reasons as to why parents of special need teenagers have trouble saying 'no' to their child. Sometimes parents are consciously or unconsciously competing with their spouse as to who is the 'favorite' parent. Over-indulging a teen with special needs may be one unfortunate expression of underlying marital stress that the child has been made a reluctant third party to. Under these circumstances, corrective measures may include seeking professional psychological therapy for both parenting support as well as marital counseling to help families straighten their priorities and alliances and assist in the daunting task of raising a teen with special needs.

In the course of self-reflection, parents also have to be honest with themselves. For many mothers and fathers, the task of raising their potentially rebellious special needs teen can coincide with the

timing of their own midlife crisis. Consequently, what many families experience are the parallel processes of parents and teens trying to work through unresolved adolescent issues. If a parent has not yet come to terms with the way in which he/she was brought up (too restrictive, too many negatives), then this parent may try to repair their own restrictive childhood by indulging the next generation and ultimately living vicariously through the antics of their wayward teen.

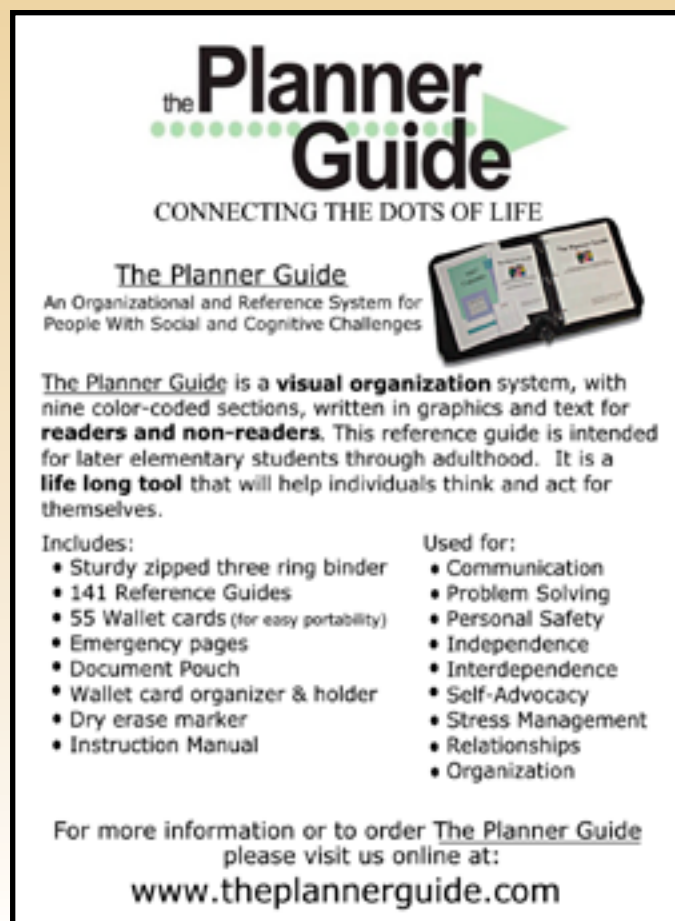
It is critical, under these circumstances, for parents to thoughtfully evaluate themselves before they can place appropriate limits on their challenging teen. One suggestion is to have moms and dads ask themselves the following five questions as a way to assess parental position and motivation. These thoughts include:

- 1) What are your parental strengths?
- 2) What are the strengths and challenges of my teen with special needs?
- 3) What areas of parenting can I improve in?
- 4) How do my children 'push my buttons' and why are 'those buttons' available to be pushed in the first place?
- 5) What are my feelings/conflicts about having a special needs adolescent and how are these feelings impacting my ability to parent?

By a parent using these five questions as guidelines to address underlying unresolved issues, both parent and teen stand a better chance of being able to see discipline for the tool that it can be and not the weapon that it might inadvertently become.

One final challenge that occurs when a parent tries to say 'no' to their special needs teen is whether or not the disciplinary message is received by their child. Too often, parents express feelings of frustration with their adolescent for what appears to be a total lack of response to what the parent is saying to them. Upon closer examination, the trouble appears to not be the message of discipline itself, but rather the way in which the message is delivered and ultimately how it is received.

Children and adolescents with developmental delays, such as autism, are often impacted with individual neurological differences, including auditory processing distortions. As the name suggests, auditory processing issues have little to do with the child's actual capacity to hear the message. Rather, there appears to be multiple areas of distortions within the processing capacities of the auditory area of the brain, which can make the message all but impossible to understand. Under these circumstances, it is imperative that parents present their messages to their teen in a fashion that is conducive to understanding. One suggestion is to create, with your adolescent, a series of visual maps (rules, requirements and a structured schedule of expectations) to supplement the auditory message that is being presented. That



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way, for instance, if a parent wants his/her child to come down to the dinner table, then the parent needs to deliver the verbal message face-to-face (never shout to the child about the dinner-time message because the idea that will be conveyed is 'up the volume' not 'come downstairs for dinner'), present the visual supplement (the map), and follow it with instructions for the teen to check off the accomplished task on the schedule when complete. Most adolescents, when asked why they did not listen to parental requests, were quick to say that they really had no idea what it was that their parent wanted.

In review, on route to being able to parent successfully, moms and dads need to be able to honestly assess how their child's autism impacts them and to look inside themselves to reflect how they tolerate hearing the word 'no' in the first place. For children, clear and consistent boundaries give the child a sense of security. Once answered, it is imperative for parents to get the support they need (psychological, educational, religious, spiritual) so that they can do the tough job of raising their challenged teen in a wise and timely fashion. Lastly, when a parent does impose disciplinary actions on their special needs adolescent, they have to make sure that the message is given in such a fashion that it remains clear and understandable. A message that is heard and understood has a better chance of being fulfilled. **TAP**



Dr. Esther B. Hess is a licensed clinical psychologist. She specializes in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of individuals with developmental delays utilizing a developmentally/relational based psychotherapy (the DIR model) as devised by Drs. Stanley Greenspan and Serena Weider. This model takes into consideration the various underlying elements that may be impeding the child, including where he/she is at developmentally, various biological constraints that may be impeding development, and the relationship between the child and the parent. In addition to working with the impacted person, Dr. Hess interfaces with the entire family and coordinates the efforts of the various members of team specialists who assist in boosting the impacted individual's developmental lag.

Dr. Hess is certified in the D.I.R./Floor Time model and is currently one of Dr. Greenspan/Weider's Senior Clinicians on the West Coast. She has trained parents, interventionists and clinicians throughout the United States in the developmental/relational method known as Floor Time. Dr. Hess has a private practice in West Los Angeles. You can reach Dr. Hess through her e-mail address: Drhess@drhessautism.com.

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