

# How To Talk With Teenagers

*Succeeding with Our Most Reluctant Clients*

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# CONVENTIONAL PLATFORM FOR CONNECTING WITH NEW CLIENTS

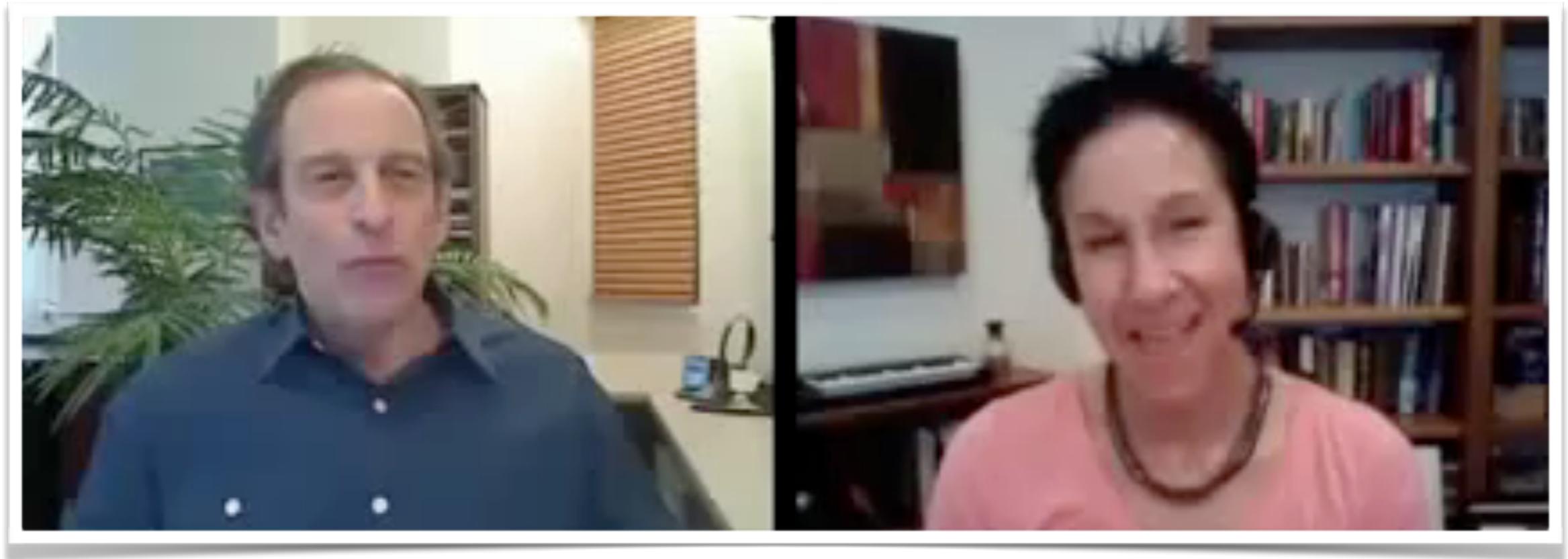
empathy  
unconditional support  
emotional safety  
confidentiality

We were taught that expressions of empathy and assurances of support and safety were the cornerstones of therapy, allowing people to enter into a sound therapeutic relationship.

However...

... many teenagers balk when their therapists demonstrate a lot of empathy for them, especially at the beginning stages when they are still unfamiliar to each other. It doesn't match up with the newness of the relationship, and can feel claustrophobic.

Interview with Rich Simon, Editor, Psychotherapy Networker, about counseling teenagers and whether therapists can be “too” empathic.



The manner in which the other principles are applied in therapy with teenagers may also compromise its effectiveness.

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- unconditional support or emotional safety taken too far may keep a therapist from asking important questions or bringing up something in session that calls out for attention
- unwavering allegiances to confidentiality can cause therapists to miss out on opportunities for healing within the teen or the teen's family

Indirect or more subtle expressions of empathy are typically more comfortably tolerated by teens than ones that are very frank and direct.

# How can we express our empathy for teen clients in ways it doesn't become unpalatable?

## 1) Express it more understatedly.

- By modifying what you say or how you say it.

## 2) Express it nonverbally.

- Nonverbal communications indicating that you “get it” are helpful.

## 3) Express it more indirectly.

- By showing respect for the teenager's personality as it intersects with therapy.
- By asking a question that shows you are attuned to your client's experience in the moment or becoming aware of things that others have missed or did not think were important.

**These are some ways you can convey respect, compassion, and warmth toward your teen clients without coming off as unnaturally empathic.**

## **Demonstrate...**

- **respect**
- **compassion**
- **warmth**

**toward your teen clients without  
coming off as unnaturally empathic.**

Helpful modifications to the principle of unconditional support have less to do with modifying the support itself (which is always part of a good therapy) than with bringing *into* the therapy a counterbalancing arm of accountability.

Modifications to emotional safety can include recognizing that for adolescents, a more important concern than becoming overwhelmed by affects, memories, and the like in session may be a need to save face, or to know that their therapist will never exploit something they said in error or inadvertently in order to “prove” a point.

## **Modifications in confidentiality that may help our work with adolescent clients include:**

- 1) Applying confidentiality judiciously in the therapy rather than unconditionally from the beginning.**
- 2) Talking with teens about the sorts of things that wish they were able to discuss with their parents, and whether they might be interested in your facilitating such a conversation.**
- 3) Being on “everyone’s side at the same time” allows the therapist to maintain simultaneous alliances with teens and parents and transition fluidly between supporting and challenging family members even within the same session.**

# NEW PLATFORM FOR CONNECTING WITH ADOLESCENT CLIENTS

credibility  
respect  
accountability  
presence

# credibility

We earn credibility with our clients when we are seen as having the expertise to really help them, and the trustworthiness they need us to have in order to let us do so.

We demonstrate expertise not through our titles or degrees but by actually saying or doing something in session that says to a kid you “get” it where others haven’t, and can do something about it.

- For example, I’m in a family session with a school avoidant teen whose long-awaited return to school is obstructed by his need to save face with parents who always make a big deal of being right. I might say to the parents (with their son present), “I actually think your son would return to school if he knew the two of you wouldn’t do a victory dance across the kitchen floor...”

Another part of being credible has to do with being **congruent**, that is, what you think and feel and say are all in alignment.

One of the ways therapists lose credibility with their teen clients is by being *incongruent* with them. Usually that takes the form of having a reaction to something in session that warrants attention, but not saying anything about it because they think their client will get defensive or upset or see the therapist as unsupportive.

This happens especially in the beginning stages of therapy when clinicians are thinking it's too early in the relationship to take a chance on saying something the client won't like. But I think the *opposite is true* —that when a therapist speaks candidly, confidently, and sensitively to whatever it is in the session that calls for attention, and does it in a way that neither offends the client nor mandates that s/he change, the therapeutic relationship is actually strengthened. Not only is the teenager drawn in by the authenticity of the therapist, but also by his/her ability to handle difficult topics or situations.

- Example: The teenager who is disrespectful to his parents in session and his parents don't respond. Do you? If so, how?

# respect

By respecting the fact that our clients may not be ready to acknowledge having a problem, or may not be ready do anything about the problems they do acknowledge, we avoid getting into power battles where we are trying to get them to make changes they have no interest in making.

It is in our reactions to the problems that these kids *do* talk about that they discern our respect for the fact that they are *their* problems, not ours, and that they get to decide whether or not they want to do anything about them.

# accountability

Accountability, powerful as a philosophy and intervention both, refers to a therapist's willingness and ability to hold clients accountable for the choices they make. There is no criticism or judgment passed on the client because of the behaviors they exhibit; it just means that the therapist attributes to them choice, meaning, and responsibility.

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**These twin tasks of demonstrating compassion and holding adolescents accountable for their choices and behaviors create an active tension for therapists throughout the course of therapy.**

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Examples:

Critical, judgmental 15 yr old Elena who loves to study serial killers

Delightful, verbose 11 yr old Declan with his IQ of 145

**The role of accountability in adolescent therapy (and in an adolescent's emotional maturation) is never a matter of "getting" the teen to own up to problems or agree to work on them. It serves, in part, to dis-illusion teenagers about their ability to control the perceptions of other people.**

**When you offer too much support to clients without counterbalancing it against accountability, you can end up with a situation in which the teenager's symptoms or problems are tolerated as by-products of the distress he or she feels.**

**Here's an example of two different approaches to working with an anxious, depressed 14 yr old girl with unregulated emotions. One embraces the importance of accountability in helping the girl, and the other does not.**

People feel bad for kids who feel bad and it creates blind spots, which feeds back into our current **narrative about adolescence** — the one that tells us things about our children that are *not* true, such as:

- That being mouthy, moody, or otherwise unpleasant is “typical” teenager behavior.
- That shoving one’s brother out of the way or exploiting what you know about your siblings in order to bully them (e.g., that they are struggling in a certain class at school, that their soccer team did poorly, that they feel responsible for their best friend’s problems) is a part of “normal” sibling rivalry.
- That teens want nothing to do with us because they think they have it all figured out.
- That it’s not our fault we can’t have a conversation because they don’t want to hear anything we have to say.

# It's bad Kool-Aid. Yet everyone's drinking it.

Besides being inaccurate, it:

- is divisive.
- encourages mistrust, condescension, disrespect, and discourages communication and vulnerability.
- dissuades parents from addressing problems their kids are having that really do need attention.
- absolves parents of their responsibility for the disconnects taking place between them and their teenagers.
- becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- is patronizing and insulting to kids

# presence

This principle has to do with the attitude and bearing of therapists, and affects the ways in which we take command of a session, of the room, and of the process of the therapy without robbing clients of their control.

Holding the space for a conversation with fewer questions, more engagement, genuine affect, and real relevance for the teen.

**“How do I get this kid to talk?” is not the question we need to ask ourselves.**

**A better question is, “How can I become a compelling and relevant enough figure to this teenager that he actually *wants* to talk with me?”**

# Working with Parents

Some of the same things that jeopardize a therapist's ability to influence teenagers affects parents as well.

In addition, that balance between demonstrating compassion and holding a child or teen accountable for their choices and behaviors creates a similar active tension for parents as it does for therapists.

**What interferes with parents' abilities to hold their teenagers accountable for their behavior?**

- they're not sure whether their teen is capable of what they would be asking of him/her; they have trouble differentiating between helping and enabling
- they are worried they'll come off as unsympathetic or out-of-touch, or maybe worried about losing out to the more indulgent parent
- their innate temperament, family-of-origin issues, or a recent history of high conflict in the home renders them conflict-avoidant
- they want to protect their teenager from the consequences of his/her behavior ("I didn't work this hard to give my daughter all these advantages just so she could throw it away on one bad decision.")
- they are unaware of the role that accountability plays in emotional maturation
- they are too easily manipulated because of guilt, fatigue, feeling overwhelmed, or wanting to feel "close" to their son or daughter



These parents err on the side of leniency, and choose to look the other way, rescue their teen from an uncomfortable situation, or use their influence to make the problem go away.

## Parents, by the way, are accountable too:

- In a family session where the parents are steamrolling over their teenager's point of view or feelings, I might ask the teen, "It seems hard to get your point across to your parents about this. Does that happen often?"

If I think the parents will react defensively, I'd instead say to them, "Is it sometimes hard for you to take Noah's ideas seriously when you're still angry with him about something else?" or "Tell me how you guys balance the input among the three of you when everyone has such different opinions." (as a way of bringing out the issue that they *don't* balance it)

Let's look at how we can assist families and help parents to hold their teenagers accountable.

It is important that accountability be addressed **not** in a spirit of control, punishment or shaming

but as a reflection of how healthy, respectful human communities operate.

## 1) Helping parents distinguish between helping their teen and enabling

Parents and educators often wrestle to find a good middle ground between not asking / expecting enough of their kids or students, and asking / expecting too much. The ground is even harder to find when a child has some kind of emotional or learning disability or other special educational and/or psychological need.

Some questions that come up are:

- How will I know how hard to push?
- Do I let him off the hook too easily?
- She says I'm unfair. Am I?
- When can I stop feeling sorry for him?
- When can I *start* feeling sorry for him?
- When is it okay for me to feel angry?
- When I do, can I tell him?

## Enabling:

- doing something for your child that she could do for herself
- doing something that she can't do for herself yet, but needs to begin learning how to do
- lowering standards so that she “makes the grade”
- telling your child she doesn't need to do it because of her disability/problem
- protecting your child from the consequences of her choices

# Helping:

- providing the support the child needs in order to do the task to the level that is appropriate for her
- demonstrating faith in the child's ability to manage the anxiety or frustration, coupled with support/ideas/strategies for doing so
- remaining warm and emotionally accessible while also holding the teenager accountable for how she chooses to handle herself while trying to meet the expectations (or when trying to avoid them)

## **Example of helping parents recognize enabling behavior and make shifts in how they handle things:**

A mother brought in her 13 year old daughter, Kate, saying she'd grown concerned about the amount of anxiety her she has been experiencing. Kate is trying very hard to get through middle school with all As. She is in her third quarter of her 8th grade year. Kate's anxiety was showing up in the following ways:

- Kate cannot leave an answer blank on a homework assignment. She feels she needs to complete everything, even if it's not being graded.
- Kate checks her homework sheets at least a dozen times every evening - and this is after she's completed it. She can't resist the impulse to check them over again and make sure there are no blank spaces.
- Kate also insists that her parents help her prep for exams, and has them test her over and over again with flashcards, etc., way past the point where she knows the material sufficiently. If they are tired, busy, or decline, Kate's anxiety rises until she has a full blown anxiety attack, during which she screams, cries, and yells at her parents that they are going to make her fail.

**How to address this with Kate and her mom?**

## 2. Helping parents to understand poor behaviors as choices rather than as a part of adolescence, puberty, hormones, reactions that can't be helped, "just her personality."

A father describes the challenges of dealing with his irritable, moody daughter every morning in the hour before she leaves for school. He seems to be very accommodating of her poor attitude and the way it affects everyone else in the household. He says, "“I oblige her bad behavior in the morning because I want her day to get off to as good a start as possible. It's just who she is. Besides, don't all teenagers act that way in the morning?"

**How do you address this problem?**

### **3. Modeling constructive interaction styles and/or language surrounding holding kids accountable while still expressing empathy.**

16 yr old Sadie acts very entitled and spoiled. She thinks only of herself and appears very depressed.

Her dad is estranged from his other two daughters, and fears the same will happen with Sadie, so he tip toes around her. Sadie behaves rudely at her dad's girlfriend's home: smokes, breaks door in bathroom, isolates herself with phone, etc.

When Sadie says she's losing friends, her dad loosens the parameters around going out - basically allows her to do as she pleases - so that she can go out more (and presumably keep her friendships or make new ones).

When Sadie says her boss is unfair, her dad gives her money. When he doesn't oblige, she goes off in a rage, then sulks, dejected, and tries to make him feel guilty.

**Helping the father figure out what to say and how to say it —**

4. Pointing out where teens may be manipulating their parents, or supporting parents when their teen tries to “punish” them for changing.

17 yr old Sean: (to his parents) “Fine, then I won’t go to school and let’s see how happy you’ll be then when you’re in truancy court with me.”

**How do you respond? And to whom?**

5. Challenging parents' assumptions about adolescence, or stressing that the problem won't self-correct, will likely get worse, and may even be connected to problems the teen is having outside of the home.

- *It's not a phase.*
- *It won't self-correct.*
- *Teens don't have to speak like that.*
- *Families don't have to live like that.*

Example of a very unhappy 15 yr old girl whose parents never wanted to pressure her because they a) couldn't bear to see her upset, and b) knew they would pay a price for it. Eventually the girl's moods ran the household. The parents' kid glove treatment of their daughter intensified, and the girl's level of tolerance for frustration plummeted.

**How do you work with this family?**

**Conclusion/ Q&A**

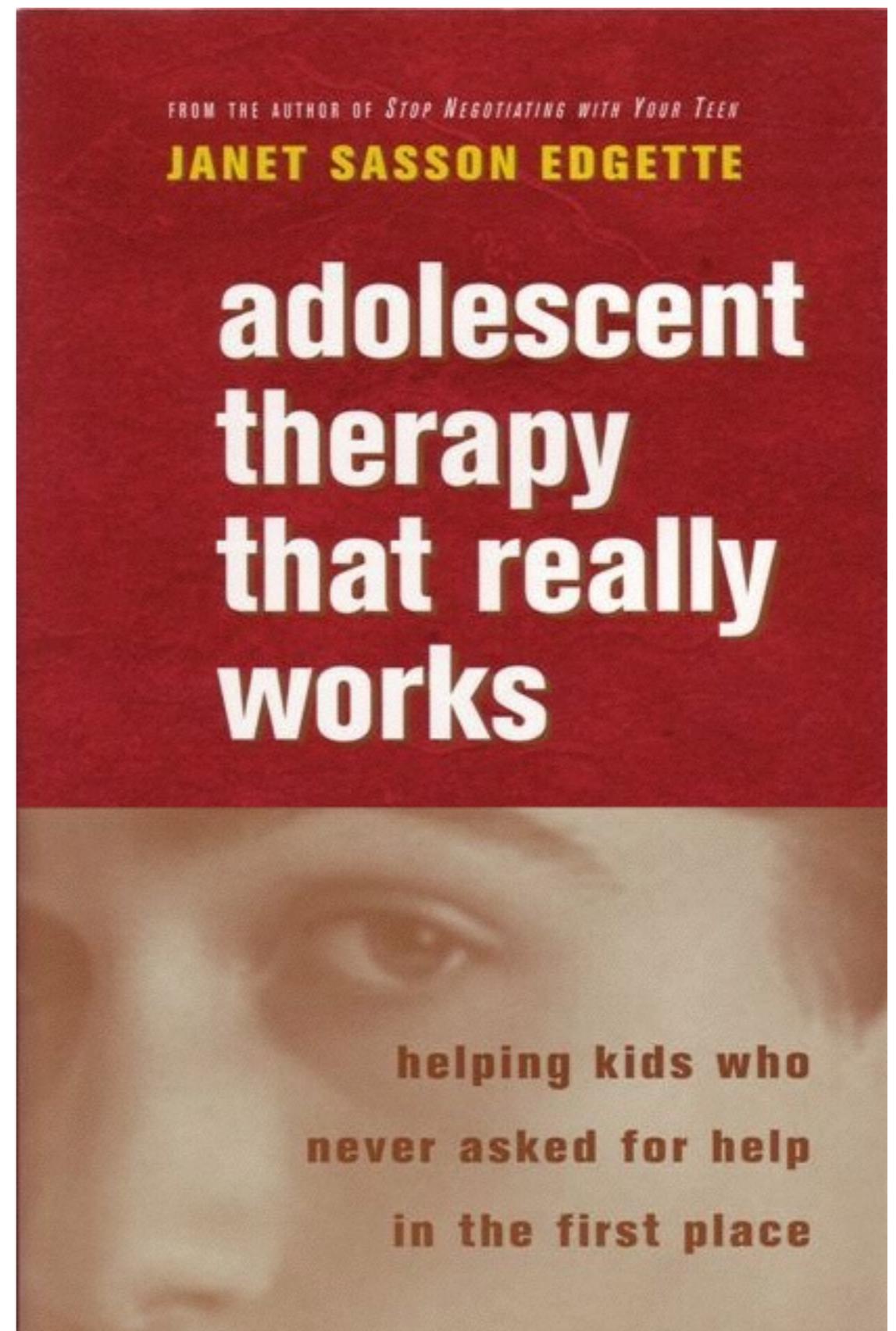
**“Offers therapists a different way to help disengaged...young clients and their families find dignified, face-saving ways out of problems.”**

**–Adolescence Journal**

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***“... deals very thoroughly with the engagement issues that recur when working with clients who have been brought to her (usually by parents) with only nominal consent.”***

**– Debate (Division of Educational Psychologists)**



# THE LAST BOYS PICKED

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HELPING BOYS  
WHO DON'T  
PLAY SPORTS  
SURVIVE  
BULLIES AND  
BOYHOOD

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"Important...insightful  
and practical advice."

—Michael Gurian

**JANET SASSON EDGETTE, PsyD**  
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**“MUST READ”**

“... a wowing and enlightening  
guide for any parent.”

**Parents**  
Magazine

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**“The Last Boys Picked is a wise and  
compassionate book that offers all of  
us...some sound advice on how to  
support our boys, level the playing field  
and take the hurt out of the athletic  
pecking order.”**

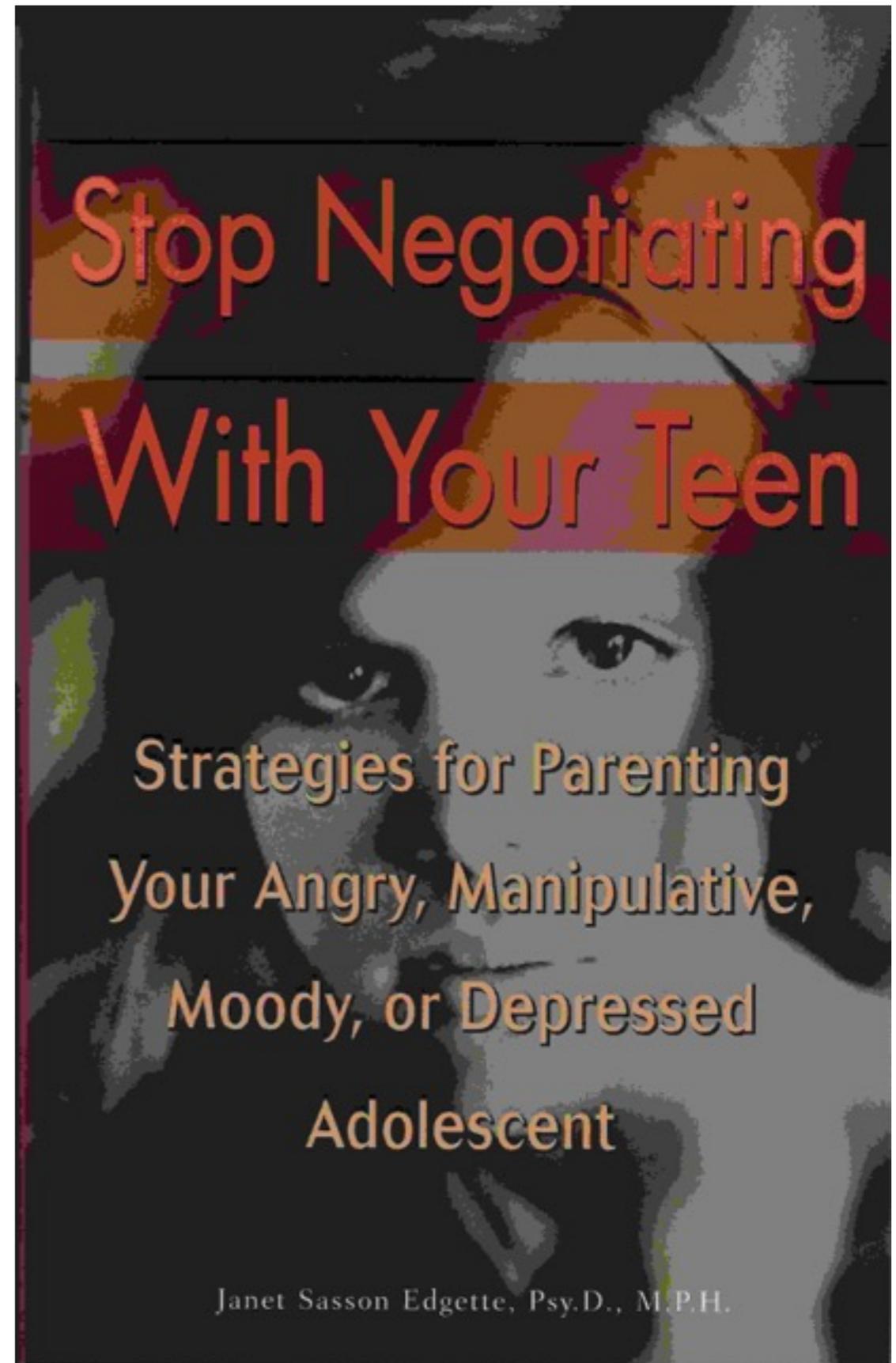
**Henry Dunow**  
author, **The Way Home**

**“Great book...  
I would highly recommend this  
book for those parents who are  
at their wit’s end.”**

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*“This may be the most sensible, wise,  
clear and reader friendly book about  
parenting adolescents that I have  
read.... Written with genuineness and  
humor, I can’t imagine any parent not  
finding themselves between the pages,  
laughing and learning and coming out  
with more clarity and a saner family life!”*

Deborah MunGavin



**I invite you to contact me with any questions or comments you may have following the workshop.**

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W.W. Norton following the workshop!**

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