***Are Therapists Seeing a New Kind of Attachment?***

By Ron Taffel

Over the past decade or two, seasoned therapists who treat young people have been seeing some increasingly worrisome trends. Although solid statistics are hard to come by, one indication of a surge in troubled young adults comes from the reports of college mental health services. A 2010 survey by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles of almost 202,000 incoming college freshmen at 279 colleges and universities showed a shocking decline in self-reported mental and emotional well-being—at its lowest level since 1985, when HERI began conducting the surveys. In this recent survey, the percentage of students who rated their emotional health “above average” fell from 64 percent in 1985 to 52 percent. According to the June 2013 *APA Monitor*, 95 percent of surveyed college counseling-center directors said that the number of students with “significant psychological problems is a growing concern,” citing anxiety, depression, and relationship issues as the main problems. Another 2013 survey, the American College Health Association–National College Health Assessment, reported that 51 percent of 123,078 responders in 153 US colleges had experienced “overwhelming anxiety” during the previous year, 31.3 percent had experienced depression so severe it was difficult to function, and 7.4 percent had seriously considered suicide.

I regularly speak with tens of thousands of child professionals, parents, educators, and kids across the country, and as chair of a large nonprofit psychotherapy training and treatment agency, I compare notes with the directors of other centers as well. These extensive dialogues, though not as formal a means of data collection as the surveys above, allow me to see trends emerging just under the radar—the current one being a wave of intense anxiety and affective disorders sweeping through agencies and schools across the country, reaching deep down into elementary and even preschool. Of course, teens and young adults have always been vulnerable to the onset of serious mental illness, but these days they seem to suffer from a new kind of emotional fragility. It’s as if at a core level, their fundamental security, the very ground of their psychic being, is increasingly shaky and unreliable.

Many of these clients come into therapy initially giving few hints of standing on the edge of a deep chasm with the wind at their backs. But as treatment proceeds, we begin to hear about a range of troubling behavioral patterns that are now pretty standard: anxiety-fueled ruminations once considered to be in the realm of psychotic process, binge drinking as a regular social pastime several nights a week, even more over-the-top and exotic substance use on weekends (ketamine, molly, Xanax bars, increased-THC marijuana), random and unprotected hookups that may well include near asphyxiation-induced orgasms. We hear reports of ubiquitous cutting and growing numbers of young men who not only cut themselves, but fiercely and compulsively punch themselves. Almost all describe chronic sleep–wake reversals, up until 4 or 5 a.m. most nights. And while they may be foodies of sorts, they forget regular meals, engaging in catch-as-catch-can eating while in the midst of all-nighters watching every episode of every season of *Breaking Bad*, one after another.

Many of these young people have been doping and drinking heavily since eighth grade, so by “late and later adolescence,” as I call it, their young brains have already been pickled in alcohol and assorted chemicals. And yet these young people function just well enough to maintain a precarious balance in life. They may be holding their own (barely) in school, working just competently enough at a job not to get fired, staying out of jail, while maintaining a somewhat wobbly equilibrium in life.

Until, that is, there’s a crisis of some sort. For example, the parents of a 19-year-old woman I was seeing called to tell me that she was in a hospital, nearly comatose. After she’d downed a dozen shots in one night, her blood-alcohol level was registering above 0.30, the point of unconsciousness. In another case, a young man who’d seemed troubled yet relatively stable, began to have such severe panic attacks after the loss of a close friend that he couldn’t leave home—which immediately morphed into not going to school, 18 hours a day of ESPN, and suicidal ideation. Quickly, what had seemed like a quotidian case of needing to nudge somebody into adulthood became an all-stops-out, life-or-death emergency. These clients, and hundreds like them, who seem mentally “whole,” even if unhappy, as the surveys suggest, have little internal sense of self, barely containing the unmoored chaos reigning inside—until it bursts from its frail container.

So what’s going on with these troubled teens and young adults? Increasingly I’ve come to the conclusion that a root cause of their unsettled and precarious emotional state is a new kind of pseudo-connection in their relationship with mostly loving and well-meaning parents, one that has become a disturbingly pervasive fact of childrearing today.

**The Death of Parental Hierarchy**

For the past several decades, therapists have been seeing growing numbers of kids across the economic spectrum who were “out of control,” treating their parents with a mix of indifference and contempt. Initially, in line with family systems thinking, therapists blamed the problem on lapsed parental hierarchy, and the sovereign remedy was to reestablish authority in the home—put mom and dad in charge again. Only, as so many therapists, teachers, and parents were telling me by the early ’90s, there wasn’t much adult authority anymore, no matter how hard individual parents struggled to exert it. The self-contained family unit that had once held real power over kids’ lives had been coopted by a voracious pop-and-peer kid culture—what I call “the second family”—that, in essence, had supplanted most meaningful adult authority in kids’ lives. Indeed, many of the teens I saw, and those seen by countless other therapists, had less and less contact with their “first families” at home, the hopelessly ineffectual people who’d actually birthed and tried to instill discipline and respect in them.

This trend wasn’t a result of parents’ not caring enough or not being competent enough to wield a little power over their kids’ lives: it came from an attenuation of the social contexts that had sustained and reinforced family authority. For better and worse, intact families were being broken by divorce, and tightly knit communities—in which everyone knew the neighborhood children—were fragmenting. At the same time, as many researchers have documented, the complex influence of traditional support systems, like extended kin networks, churches and synagogues, and community organizations, was waning. Into this void rushed the technologically burgeoning forces of pop culture and peer group, a massive external locus of influence, which even today continues to seep into our homes and consciousness, usurping much of traditional family authority.

By the early ’90s, I was aware of another increasingly potent solvent of family ties: the nonstop distraction of work and culture, which further fragmented parents’ attention into tiny shards. Even when parents were physically with their children, they were often too busy to be genuinely with them. By this time, the techie innovations that would transform our world were well on their way to becoming the ubiquitous gadgets we now can’t seem to live without. But today, a growing body of research suggests that this technology and the information overload it dumps on us undermine not only our ability and desire to interact directly with real human beings, but also our capacity to focus for long on much of anything—even our children.

In 2012, In Technology reported that one-third of American mothers had mobile devices and averaged 6.1 hours per day on their smartphones, with 89 percent of these mothers saying their devices were always within arm’s reach. It’s the inevitability of interrupted attention that jumps out. As one mother recently told me, between texting, tweeting, online chatting, checking Facebook, and sharing Instagram photos, she was always running from stimulus to stimulus. When another devoted young mother described the time she was spending nursing her baby, no sweet image of blissful attunement emerged. Instead, she admitted to thinking things like Thank god, time to nurse her so I can sit for a while. I can text Annie while I do this and, hey, I might as well make my credit-card payment. Wait, is that my phone ringing? Should I take the call? No, I shouldn’t; this is my time with my baby. But it might be important. Oh, I forgot I’ve got to get ready for that meeting tomorrow and put those sales objectives together. Wait, the baby’s squirming. Okay, calm down, calm down. Ah, finally, she looks so peaceful and beautiful. Where’s my camera? I have to post this image!

So we see in our offices a generation of late teens and young adults who’ve grown up getting this kind of agitated, fragmented, distracted attention from their parents. No wonder over the past decade or so, attachment seems largely to have replaced hierarchy as the buzzword of choice in psychotherapy circles. But the insidious effect of jagged consciousness on attachment from well-meaning parents is still insufficiently recognized. I’m not saying that technology lures parents away from kids: rather, I’m highlighting a redefining of connection in which hyperaroused parents can’t stop shifting focus. If love is, as has been suggested, focused interest, how can chronic distraction translate into secure attachment? Perhaps that’s why so many of the kids and parents we see in therapy resort to intense drama to get through to each other.

Recently, a study published in the journal Pediatrics by Jenny Radesky demonstrated with surreptitiously observed caregivers and children in fast-food restaurants how device-distracted the adults were. The caregivers, usually parents, were spending much of the meal absorbed in their smartphones, ignoring their children, who were making repeated and escalating bids for attention. A baby in a stroller, for example, made faces and smiled at her mother, who was absorbed by a YouTube video and didn’t respond. Three little boys escalated their attempts to get their father’s attention by singing silly songs, giggling, and slamming into each other, to which the father responded with increasing irritation, telling them repeatedly and more loudly to stop it, and immediately returning to his cell phone. Just last night, in fact, my daughter’s friends reported that on their obstetrics residencies they’d noticed fathers glued to cell phones—during delivery!

**Untethered Helicopters**

You might be wondering, Isn’t this supposed to be the age of helicopter parenting? Aren’t parents too involved in their children’s lives? Well, yes—but this is another powerful way that connection has been altered, another shade of pseudo-attachment. Helicopter parenting doesn’t equate with connection. It means that overinvolved parents who keep their kids on a bullet-train of activity can’t help but repeatedly push them away from the anchoring of soothing, reliable attachment—always on to the next activity. For example, I consulted with a high-school senior who thought he’d finally made the break from mom and dad after his acceptance into a state school on an athletic scholarship. But he was wrong. Wanting to make sure he didn’t slip up and lose the scholarship, they continued pushing on every homework assignment that needed to be tackled, every final exam on the docket, and every after-school activity.

Is it surprising that in treatment he suddenly revealed going through bouts of suicidal thinking, buried beneath flash rages in which he’d suddenly throw objects at family members or open the car door and threaten to leap out onto the parkway? Again, this is the kind of dramatic burst of impulsivity I increasingly hear. After talking to mom and dad, it became clear that they all loved each other, but moments of attachment were almost always cut short by sudden redirection to the next tasks that needed to be accomplished.

It wasn’t much different when I interviewed 20 middle-school kids in a charter school. My job was to bring their message back to teachers and parents, and an eighth-grader articulated it bluntly: “Tell them to stop moving us from one thing on the conveyor belt to another. Isn’t there anything else they want to do with us?” If, as the research shows, restful downtime is necessary for kids’ brains to synthesize new information, slow comfort time may also be necessary to internalize secure attachment—and this sort of time is equally endangered.

**Confused Connection**

Certainly, we’re living in an era of pervasive psychological information, in which every parent is provided an inexhaustible waterfall of advice, much of it state of the art. But I wonder about the impact of all this advice on parenting. The same unstoppable flow of child-rearing information that lifts our knowledge base often confuses mothers and fathers, right out of their truly felt responses, creating another shade of pseudo-attachment between parent and child.

There are more than 86,000 parenting titles currently listed on Amazon.com, countless Internet sites and blogs authored by parenting professionals, teaser headlines every time we open our browsers, along with endless TV advice and reality shows. Parenting research has grown exponentially, as has the number of theories and perspectives. All this knowledge is to be commended, but in terms of secure attachment, it’s also a kind of trap, instilling the idea that every move a parent makes has the power to destroy a child’s chances in life before he or she even reaches toddlerhood. Naturally, wanting to do what’s best for their kids, many parents are sitting ducks for this flood-tide of information, too often turning them into insecure child-rearing advice junkies, who, paradoxically, spend so much time worrying about sorting out the right move that they often don’t have the conviction to be fully present in the moment.

Rather than experiencing and expressing a full-bodied emotional connection to their own child—whether in love or anger or disappointment—parents sometimes seem to be acting out an in vivo child-rearing manual. For decades with diverse audiences, when I’ve asked the simple question “What makes for good consequences when a child misbehaves?” the response has become an ever increasing list of abstract shoulds, including “Consequences should be natural . . . immediately follow the event . . . fit the crime . . . teach values . . . impart empathy . . . match a child’s learning style,” and so on. While such ideas certainly make sense, it’s as if these bloodless responses were taken from a textbook on enlightened criminology, rather than coming from the heart and mind of an emotionally committed parent struggling to instill discipline in a beloved, but undeniably wayward, son or daughter.

**Self-Conscious Attachment**

Today, the continual pressure to do parenting right makes parents superconscious about not only any sign of pathology in their kids, but themselves as parents. Never before have parents tried so relentlessly to think through every step of the child-rearing experience, from the first detection of pregnancy until well into their child’s young adulthood. Mothers-to-be now routinely join online groups of other newly pregnant women and submerge themselves in a sea of how-tos and debates about what constitutes correct preparation for motherhood and infant care. Here’s a fairly typical stream of consciousness from the mom of an elementary-school child I met with: I shouldn’t have yelled at him, but he was about to break that plate, and he’s got to learn that he can’t have everything. How long is it okay for me to let him wail like that? He’s got to learn the meaning of ‘no,’ doesn’t he? Didn’t that article say disappointment helps with resilience? So maybe I shouldn’t comfort him. Is that too Tiger Mom-ish? Okay, breathe along with him at the same pace. It helps the baby’s amygdala relax. . . or something.

Of course, as a parent, this resonates with me. Recently, my wife and I were sitting in a waiting area for several hours. A captive audience, we were entertained—if that’s the word—by TV shows featuring several parenting experts offering different views on issues such as eating disorders, nutrition, Asperger’s, and after-school activities. Even at this point in our lives, my wife and I—both therapists and a relatively confident, middle-aged couple—could still be reduced to jangling insecurity about our own parenting skills by this high-def show detailing all the ways we might have failed or, at the very least, done a lot better.

These days, I’m regularly startled by the sophistication of mothers and fathers in every part of the country—urban, suburban, and rural—about childhood psychiatric diagnoses and their hawkeyed vigilance for signs of same in their own children. Despite the incredible good that early detection has done, I now have the impression that many parents are not really seeing their child directly. Instead, they’re looking at their child, on the alert for pathology, for a sign or symptom. When, 20 years ago, I began asking parents about specific issues, like sensory defensiveness or low-tone upper bodies or temperament, they used to stare at me blankly, not knowing what I was talking about. Now, they regularly cite behaviors that worry them and ask, “Do you think my child is on the autism spectrum? Is this normal anxiety, or is my 5-year-old showing the signs of OCD or PTSD? I know it’s only elementary school, but do you think she could be bipolar?”

While diagnostic sophistication saves countless lives, I’ve been writing for years about how mothers and fathers are held hostage by fears about their kids and how this affects their ability to establish hierarchy. But now I’m equally concerned about its impact on secure attachment. There’s something different in a child’s being seen and held by parental love, rather than inspected for a potential disorder. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that so many more teens and young adults I work with these days come in with intense anxiety and ruminative symptoms. Preoccupied, worried mothers and fathers can’t help but transmit their overanxious concern through vigilant attachment.

Claire, a 15-year-old girl I saw, was riddled with disordered eating severe enough that every calorie for the next three meals completely occupied her mind. She also suffered through sudden ruminative spiraling about her parents’ safety if she didn’t do her bedtime rituals correctly. This led to anxiety attacks so severe she needed several emergency-room visits. Exposure therapy had helped a little, but what turned the tide was when I encouraged her divorced parents to try to stop subtly inspecting her mental well-being. They were on the lookout for the sleeper-effect of separation, especially prevalent among girls, that they’d been warned about so often. Tipping off this unhealthy shade of attachment, Claire said to me, “When I get up in either house, they stare at me as they say ‘good morning,’ looking me over. I always feel like I’m under a microscope. And then I don’t want to be near them!”

**Premeditated Parenting**

As we move slowly beyond the great recession, today’s young people are the first American generation in a long while expected to be less well-off than their parents. So we have a paradoxical situation, in which the pressure to produce successful kids has never been more relentless or harder to achieve, especially with mass culture suggesting that if kids do fail, it must be because mom and dad failed in some way. Thus, it’s easy to understand how parental focus can shift from the child to the child-as-product, underlining a kind of premeditated parenting with calculated ends in mind. If you’d asked any of our own parents why they said goodnight or read us a bedtime story or grounded us for the weekend, they’d have been hard pressed for an answer beyond “that’s what everyone does” or “because I’m the parent.” Certainly, they wouldn’t have had a psychological agenda in mind, much less a strategy to “build strong attachment bonds” or “improve emotional adjustment in life.”

It’s striking to consider the attachment implications when parental behavior isn’t really about what it seems to be about, but is in service of a whole other agenda. Yet this is exactly what I hear from diverse groups with statements like “I give my child a hug when he does something well because kudos build self-esteem” or “When she bumped herself, once I realized she wasn’t really hurt, I let her cry because she needs to develop grit” or “We’re strict about keeping schedules because rituals instill emotional security.”

To try to raise a child “by the book,” or according to the dictates of thousands of experts (like me) gabbling away, is like trying to determine a good diet by following food fads. After all, butter was once very, very bad; now it’s good—sort of. Both are enterprises doomed to fail, or at least to create unintended consequences. So we have earnest, committed, caring parents trying their best to follow an almost infinite number of often contradictory prescriptions to produce a perfect commodity with greater market potential. What could possibly be wrong with that?

**Three-Dimensional Attachment**

A lot! The usurpation of parenting instincts has serious attachment consequences. For one thing, as brain imaging one day will show, kids can tell the difference between authentic, three-dimensional connection and a two-dimensional parental processing that passes for the real thing. It’s not easy to describe this subtle kind of relational shift, but I believe that the problems so many young adults bring into therapy are related to the contextually driven dilution of parental connection into something not quite fully there—a parental attachment facsimile.

This pseudo-connection has deep implications for the clients we see. We live in a culture immersed in emotional dysregulation—a kind of nonstop, excessively stimulating too-muchness. This is all fine, as long as you have the ego strength and stability to absorb hyperstimulation without being undone by it. But, as we’re learning, people need secure attachment, along with the luck of a good genetic and temperament draw, to develop a sturdy sense of self. And this is exactly where the long-term erosion of effective parental hierarchy, and now the diminution of unself-conscious parenting, create many new shades of pseudo-attachment. By the time teens and young adults reach us, they’ve spent years seeking out intense attachments in the “second family” of the peer group and pop culture; yet for all the relational good that happens between kids every day, these are often dysregulated bonds, fraught with techno-driven highs and instant-feedback lows.

Given the subtle but pervasive pseudo-attachment between teens and their parents, my goal is to help them differentiate and at the same time become closer, or—to use a decidedly nonclinical term—more three-dimensional. That means along with limits, I strongly focus on creating points of connection, encouraging things frowned upon in the glory days of family hierarchy: mutual caretaking, greater companionship, sharing of confidences, and becoming partners in fun and relaxation. As a central part of that, I try to allow myself to be a fuller, more spontaneous person in the consulting room than I’d ever have imagined myself to be earlier in my career.

When Johnny first came to my office, he was a 20-year-old college student on academic probation despite being strikingly smart. Like many young adults, he’d had an extremely wild adolescence, partying most nights and barely attending school. He experienced intense moods and bursts of anger, brimming with character assaults that often left his overwhelmed single mother, Maggie, feeling psychologically shredded when she wasn’t intensely frustrated with him. While Johnny had a capacity for kindness and empathy, his volatility and continued school failure were wreaking havoc with his future.

Maggie, a small-town girl from a straight-laced family, had become a successful mid-level administrator in a male-dominated field, and believed in “enlightened” parenting. Despite previous therapists encouraging her to put limits on Johnny, she continued to think that, yes, limits were good, but Johnny was fragile and needed shoring up with praise. In sessions with her, I tried to help her cut down on the disconnected, forced kudos, but it had no impact. So in a joint meeting with Johnny and Maggie that had been going nowhere, I hesitantly began to share stories about how other families, including my own, were also rigidly self-conscious with their kids. “Even given all my experience, I can’t believe how hard it’s been to break out of parenting roles and be more unself-consciously honest,” I said. “If you’re like me, you’ll have to work at it for years to unlearn old, bad habits.” Slightly emboldened, Maggie turned to her son and said with tears in her eyes, “I’m afraid not only of your anger, but of how fragile you sometimes seem. That’s why I back off. That’s why I’m always making such a fuss over you.”

At this, however, Johnny flew into a rage, called her a “stupendously stupid bitch,” and stormed out of the room.

Nothing changed for weeks. Between her own screaming complaints for him to do better in school, which Johnny simply ignored, Maggie continued to swoon with calculated affection, only increasing Johnny’s contempt, as well as their disconnection. Meeting with him, I addressed his anger in direct and personal terms. “I love talking to you,” I said. “But I shudder to think about being on the receiving end of one of your diatribes. I know you don’t expect to hear this from a therapist, but you simply need to be nicer to your mother!”

Johnny erupted, “That’s what mothers are for! I’m supposed to walk all over her! Besides, as I keep telling her, she’s a phony!”

“Yes,” I replied. “She’s phony because she’s misguided about parenting. Even so, your mother is trying to do the right thing and deserves better from you.” Johnny looked at me with scorn. And I wondered how, after so many years of sophisticated clinical training, I could have found myself deliberately and so directly trying to induce guilt in a young client.

But Johnny was right about Maggie’s overdone, self-conscious displays of support, regardless of his behavior. Thus, I began to focus on what genuine emotion might lurk beneath all the hovering earnestness. I wanted to get at Maggie’s mostly hidden outrage at Johnny’s behavior to jolt her into more spontaneous ways of connecting. “The way he speaks to you bothers me,” I said, “It’s like a punch to the solar-plexus. Maggie, you’re allowed to get angry when he’s mean. What keeps you from saying, ‘You’re being incredibly cruel right now’ and just leaving the room?”

“No, I can’t do that,” Maggie responded. “I can’t let him know that he gets to me. I’ve read in a lot of places he needs to see I can take it. I need to be a role-model of strength.”

“That’s one of those parenting myths that gets in the way,” I said. “I’ve fallen for it myself. Sometimes, to connect, we just need to find how to tell our kids the truth.”

Maggie was listening now, but still unconvinced. I realized that her relationship with her son was so decidedly two-dimensional that besides her good-parenting strategies, she didn’t have many ways to talk with him. So I suggested to her, “Instead of constantly doling out praise, I’d love to see you spend time with him doing absolutely nothing. Just get comfortable.”

One night, despite Johnny’s moving to the other end of the sofa, Maggie sat with him watching TV, saying little at all. Unexpectedly, after doing nothing together, he kissed her goodnight. Maggie was a bit stunned. Like other parents of teens and young adults, she’d resigned herself to inexplicable shifts in closeness and distance, although they left her Googling whether this might indicate a bipolar disorder. Johnny was similar to many of the mercurial kids I see. He alternated harsh outbursts with times when he tried to reconnect by draping himself like a baby chimp around his mother, often seconds after raking her over the coals.

I asked Maggie how she felt when he came over to give her a hug soon after an eruption. “Frankly, I feel disgusted,” she said.

Finally sensing an opening, I moved. “So be a real person. I know it sounds impossible for a ‘good’ parent, but if he’s spoken to you brutally, turn him away if he wants to hug you. Besides, let’s face it, given how resentful he just made you feel, it’d be a phony connection anyway.”

That week, after Johnny had vented his anger at her over some trivial incident, Maggie was finally able to look him in the eye and forcefully say without screaming, “Get away from me. That was incredibly nasty.” Afterward, she shook with anger, as well as fear that she’d lost him forever. So she was totally taken aback when she received the following text sent from the next room: “Sorry. I’ll cook dinner tonight.”

From that point, the disconnected focus on teaching, praising, and taking whatever Johnny dished out began to shift, as did her own frustrated outbursts. After he completed the first term paper in his long, uphill academic struggle, Maggie said nothing encouraging or praiseworthy, but simply suggested, “Hey, would you like to go out for lunch?” At the local diner where the two went, they didn’t say much. But a few days later, Johnny emailed her an essay he’d written about the astonishingly wild life he’d led in high school—way beneath her radar—along with the unexpressed loss he felt over his father’s sudden death. Maggie then sent back a couple of stories detailing her own defiance when she was growing up, adding in her ambivalent feelings about Johnny’s dad and the way he sometimes treated her in the midst of his depressive episodes. These were the kind of personal truths and meaningful exchanges about shared trauma they’d never been able to have before, despite my best efforts individually and in sessions together.

Meanwhile, the more Maggie responded directly to Johnny’s actions without flailing or focusing on building his self-esteem or following the good-parenting rulebook, the fewer outbursts they had at home. At the same time, the relationship between Johnny and me opened up. We’d get into heated arguments about our different values, a major one being how he treated women as commodities to be used and then immediately discarded. “I really can’t stand how you are with women,” I told him. “If you ever decide to sleep with one because you actually like her, instead of just because ‘she’s there,’ I’ll respect you more.”

“Fuck you,” he graciously responded.

“Say what you want,” I continued, “but I remember the exact moment this happened for me—when I knew I wanted to sleep with a girl only because I liked her.”

“Tell me about it!” he said, relishing the sudden role reversal. And I did, in detail, quite aware that I was venturing out on a personal limb and grateful not to have a supervisor to report this to.

As the temperature at home warmed up a bit and his harsh moods softened in our sessions, I pushed Johnny toward greater self-care, toward becoming mindful of how his body was affected by the college world of fast food, nonexistent sleep, and excessive drinking. Slowly, he learned to think through to how anxious and self-critical binge drinking made him feel. He started recognizing his substance threshold points—when he’d get out of control—and began talking about this openly with Maggie, whose own wild past was an effective, genuine way to connect with him.

Although in the orthodoxies of modern parenting, reversals in the caretaking hierarchy are verboten, I encouraged Maggie to expect not only better behavior, but more empathy and genuine attention from her child. So one day she said to him, “It’s time you visit me at work. I want you to understand me in my world.” She was asking for respectful acknowledgement from him, instead of only the other way around. The following week, out of the blue, Johnny invited her to see his favorite music group with him. And this mother–son duo had a great time together, at a rap concert no less!

As therapists, we can’t expect parents to embrace a more genuine, three-dimensional way of responding to their children unless we’re willing to do so ourselves. That means a willingness to be both tough and tender with kids in sessions, as I was with Johnny, who finally met a girl he really cared about, one who fearlessly stood up to him. He worried, however, that she’d leave him once she discovered his tendency to be furiously overcritical. He cried as he confessed this worry to me and I told him earnestly, almost in a whisper, “She’ll learn to see past your moods and love you, just the way everyone who gets to know you has, including me—if you let her.” Johnny did; they became serious and began living together. And he became decidedly more focused on school, even graduating with honors and landing a steady job in this difficult economy.

Maggie has moved on to become a financial advisor, a field where flexibility and brutal candor are necessities. Johnny occasionally heats up in patches of moodiness with his girlfriend, and he and Maggie still go up in ephemeral flames. But it’s now Johnny who works to keep both relationships from getting close to the point of rupture.

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Like most of us, regardless of the outcome, I can’t be sure what difference my therapeutic efforts actually make. But I am sure that in a world in which it’s harder and harder for all of us to respond to each other in person, clinicians everywhere privately improvise ways to have more of an emotional impact on the distracted and dysregulated young people who come to our offices. What we need to keep reminding ourselves of is that the technical side of treatment accounts for only part of whatever positive effect we may ultimately have. It’s truly ironic that in our sometimes narrow fascination with theory and clinical methodology, we can find ourselves mirroring the subtly disconnected state of modern childrearing. For ultimately, the force that fuels connection and change comes from the kind of vital human presence that creates three-dimensional relationships and secure attachments in our consulting rooms.

We need to learn how to do this more effectively, not so much by the seat of our pants. Admittedly, it’s a challenging paradox to teach ourselves what characterizes genuine connection in treatment without becoming self-conscious in the process. But kids and parents need real, three-dimensional therapists, just as surely as they yearn for three-dimensional connections at home. And who we are in a relationship, regardless of our training or preferred theory or pet method, is at the heart of what we offer the troubled kids and confused parents who seek our involvement and guidance at the most difficult times in their lives.