



parents league
of new york

the review 2019

Essential Articles on
Parenting & Education

The New, Nonhierarchical Family

Ron Taffel, Clinical Psychologist and Writer

When I was growing up, dinner was at 6:30 p.m. sharp, timed to my father's arrival home from work. The menu was entirely predictable according to the day of the week. There were no substitutions, just one meal for the whole family. I don't remember a single phone call ever interrupting us as we sat around the table. This wasn't because no one was around to call, but because everyone else was similarly engaged—eating dinner at the same time, and eating pretty much the same thing.

Dinnertime these days bears little resemblance to that sepia image from a half-century ago. Even when family members are seated at the same table, everyone may be consuming something different—leftover mac-n-cheese, gluten-free pizza, take-out Thai—often in separate worlds. Fourteen-year-old Jenny texts under the table while answering Mom's questions about homework. Ten-year-old Bart casually asks for someone to "pass him the frigging salt." Sixteen-year-old Adelaide warns her siblings to "stay out of my way, I'm PMS-ing real bad." In a heated exchange about a midweek concert, Jenny promises to be back "no later" than 2:00 or 3:00 a.m.

What's happening here? Compared to the still-life portrait of family dinners of decades ago, this is everyday life as abstract expressionism—a free-form swirl of crisscrossing currents and tangents. Are families just chaotic and out of control? Or is this a picture of liberating spontaneity and refreshing openness? Whatever judgment you make, the question remains: What's happened over the past 20 years that has changed things so completely?

Old-style Disintegration—or New-style Togetherness?

Like countless therapists, I've seen plenty of kids who appear thoroughly hijacked by pop culture. They're disconnected from their parents and lack almost all bounds or rules—even to rebel against. At increasingly younger ages, they're casually coarse, crude and, at times, absolutely wild. They show a jaded sophistication about sex. They spend hours texting and online—on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram—submerged in a vast, constantly morphing, cybernetic network Mom and Dad can't

quite penetrate. Even the best of kids can often treat their parents like dimwitted servants whose only function is to provide food, clothing, housing and money.

Delve beneath the surface, though, and you encounter surprising paradoxes. Lots of behavior once considered outrageous, if not pathological, has become the norm—not just for some kids from unstructured families, but for most kids, to one degree or another. Yet these “impossible” kids are often remarkably smart, confident, knowledgeable, competent, deeply involved with ethical and social issues, and almost always capable of stunning kindness and generosity.

Adding to the puzzle is the attitude of parents. They rue their kids’ disregard for courtesy, decency and common sense, but semi-secretly celebrate their offspring’s freewheeling ways. The contradictory nature of kids today makes parenting more complex than it used to be. Old ideas about what constitutes “healthy” family dynamics, “appropriate” parental roles, and “reasonable” rules and regulations are at odds with reality.

Matt describes the way his buddies advise each other about romantic and ethical dilemmas, and his mother is amazed that 16-year-old boys can be each other’s emotional caretakers and show such a keen sense of relational ethics. A minute later, she’s shocked by her son’s obscenity-laced, seemingly homophobic rant. She then reminds herself that the language is teenage posturing, and it doesn’t reflect the attitude of Matt and his group, many of whose members are openly gay and some gender nonconforming.

Mary’s mother is awed by her 14-year-old’s ability to discuss just about everything with anybody; she herself was shy and tongue-tied at 14. But how to respond when her sweet-faced daughter casually describes a friend’s sexual activity, and then segues into an offhanded discussion of what body part she might have pierced: Navel? Nose? Lip?

Parents love their kids’ expressiveness and the way they stand up for themselves, but cringe at their self-centeredness and sense of entitlement. Yet the same parents brag about how wholeheartedly kids take up social and environmental causes. In home after home, we see children “greening” the family, or getting them involved in neighborhood service agencies and faith-centered charitable programs.

Even parents depleted by relentless negotiations twinkle with pride when describing their little elementary-school “litigator.” And kids continue to hone their skills. As a mother negotiated her son’s out-of-control screen time, her 11-year-old almost convinced us that “research

shows” video games increase brain development, vocabulary and reading comprehension. I caught myself considering an increase in my own kids’ video game time!

More paradox: Today’s adults allow for backtalk that would have brought down the house in my generation’s families. Most parents, committed to keeping open lines of communication with their children at all costs, display a tolerance previous generations would have marveled at. As one mother said, “I’d rather put up with some cursing than have my kid *stop* telling me what’s going on in his life.”

To be a parent today is to be regularly confused, dismayed, anxious, shocked and furious, but also astonished, fascinated, entertained, impressed and proud—sometimes in rapid succession. Trying to get it right while adrift in a sea of conflicting child-rearing fads, parents often hear they’re doing everything wrong, but even the criticisms are contradictory. They’re faulted for being pressuring, wimpy, managerial, undercontrolling and overcontrolling. They’re accused of being both helicopter parents and uninvolved, self-centered narcissists.

Nonetheless, most parents I meet more or less accept their kids as they are, and are committed to both rules and a roughly egalitarian relationship with them. They don’t yearn for the old days of predictable order and top-down family authority. In fact, they seem guided by an entirely different idea of parent-child relationships, one that reconciles seemingly impossible contradictions: individual freedom with close family ties; a reliable sense of connection despite near anarchy; rules and accountability without much family hierarchy; and quality time that doesn’t take too much time.

The Post-boomer Era

About 10 years ago, I had a sudden insight: Our society had crossed a major generational divide and embarked upon the first “post-boomer” era of parenting. Pre-boomer parents believed in hierarchy, privacy, conformity and sacrifice, while their children were caught up in the ‘60s social revolution. This clash of “old-style” and counterculture values led to profound generational conflict.

Parents and children in the post-boomer era, however, are more alike than different. Together they’ve experienced key social changes: the growth of suburbia and exurbia; widespread divorce and blended families; the ubiquity of mothers in the workforce; continual geographic relocation; overscheduled lives; globalization; and, of course, 24/7 technology. The

life narratives of this generational dyad are closer than any since World War II.

Post-boomers and their kids are, to a remarkable degree, kindred spirits. Gone is an overarching struggle for hierarchy, boundaries and individuation—replaced by a horizontal, multidirectional tension between a culture that breeds fragmentation and an increasing desire for family engagement. This revolutionary way for parents and children to feel and interact demands that two traditional bulwarks of family functioning—hierarchy and communication—be redefined.

The Learning-temperament Amalgam

Today, effective family hierarchy isn't only about rules; it's also about a parent accurately understanding his or her child, and the child feeling understood. Most older therapists and parents were taught that limits are about tough love, boundaries and enforcing rules. And while these are all necessary in daily life, 21st-century hierarchy is also about understanding how to get through in ways contemporary kids can absorb when there's too little time and less parental conviction.

Since therapy is really about learning to change, the first tool I now use is one I first heard of years ago from psychologist Rebecca Mannis: a child's "learning-temperament." My adaptation of this concept is an amalgam of learning style (e.g., auditory, visual, tactile, active, concrete and inferential learners, etc.), with an emphasis on constitutional temperament (e.g., sensory integration, tenacity, activity level, first-time reactions, basic mood, adaptability, separation sensitivity, etc.). Learning-temperament is a formidable force; it's apparent from the first years of life and doesn't always change much with age.

Understanding how a child constitutionally metabolizes information creates a respect and patience for how deeply ingrained a child's responses to adult teaching are. The effective use of this understanding increases parental authority and the chance parents will get through—that a message will stick to those walls.

For instance, once a temperamentally "tenacious" learner makes up her mind about something—whether a toy or tomorrow night's concert—she can't easily let it go. For "the rules" to get through, one must offer a couple of (acceptable) options, rather than go head to head. For example: "If you share that toy with your brother, I'll have more time to read to you before bed, or you can play with the toy by yourself."

By contrast, for a temperamentally “active” learner, rules are best offered in the midst of an activity like dancing or doing laundry, as many parents find out serendipitously. We got through to our own highly active daughter, Leah, while she practiced her gymnastic moves. Kids like Leah are more open to parental authority when they aren’t made to stop moving.

When I began to pay more attention to this aspect of adult-child interaction, I was astonished to see how a grasp of learning-temperament immediately increased parental authority. Ryan, a 12-year-old, had been asking mindless questions of his classmate Jeremy. Jeremy would ignore or dis him until Ryan lashed out in front of everyone, making Ryan look like the “bad guy” and getting him into trouble. Though smart as a whip, Ryan couldn’t understand how his behavior set him up for abuse. Instead of thinking in standard terms—a nonverbal learning disorder or ADD diagnosis—I understood that Ryan not only had trouble picking up visual cues, but, under his loud obtuseness, had a sensitive learning-temperament, which made him hear advice as criticism he must rebuke.

Ryan’s parents were stymied by his inability to grasp their guidance and by his ferocious responses, which nearly led to physical confrontations. Since I do “tempograms” (genograms tracing temperament across three generations), I wasn’t surprised to learn that several family members, including Dad, had exploded defensively against attempts at authoritative guidance: smart, but interpersonally dumb, was their theme song. Recognizing this family characteristic was a turning point. Slowly, his parents’ *edginess* about Ryan’s loud obtuseness—whiny demands for juice while watching TV, explosions when he lost at games—was replaced by the *slightly gentler tone* that Ryan needed, so he could listen and absorb the necessary rules of the house.

As fights with his parents morphed into greater mutual comfort, Ryan opened up to guidance about schoolyard politics and the impact of his impulsiveness. Positive experiences began sticking to those walls. Gradually, he stopped chasing Jeremy and found his own group of friends. Months later, he was doing what was once unimaginable: laughing together with Jeremy in the lunch room.

“Disrespect” Strengthens Hierarchy

I’ve learned, and research shows, that it’s often essential in building adult authority that kids have freedom to disagree disrespectfully—or the rules won’t stick. Today’s kids feel entitled to air their views, in real time, no matter what.

Middle-schooler Eric was explosive with his English teacher, who had graded him “unfairly” and often ignored him in class. His animosity toward the teacher continued to mount—a serious situation, since Eric was nearly flunking several classes.

I worked with Eric’s mother, Lindsey, on how to offer realistic guidelines that would leave room for sharp back-and-forth—even Eric’s maddening view that teacher-student relationships should be entirely determined by kids’ needs. In their next talk, Mom patiently listened to her son, *then* she went back to her core belief that growing up means finding ways to deal with responsible adults: Eric could figure out how to cooperate, or he’d end up in a different class next year. At first, he left these discussions furious—he didn’t think her approaches would work, and the teacher and his mother were “hopeless.” Lindsey wasn’t happy with me for outlining a tack that allowed such disrespect.

Several weeks later, however, Eric unexpectedly followed one of Mom’s suggestions. He approached his teacher privately to say how unhappy he’d been about not being called on more often. To his surprise, the teacher said Eric was right—she’d been upset that Eric openly criticized classmates; this was why she wasn’t calling on him.

This change in direction—Lindsey restating her beliefs but allowing some room for Eric’s retorts—transformed the course of the school year. Eric approached several other teachers and got positive responses. By the end of the term, he’d moved from the guidance counselors’ “watch-list” to being a contender for advanced classes. Unexpectedly, Eric began asking Lindsey’s advice about the difficult territory of girls, and then, of course, arguing about her views—a new, if fitful, kind of closeness Lindsey hadn’t imagined possible.

Conversational Style

While most parents know about attention and learning style, few are familiar with “conversational style,” a notion I picked up while listening to speech pathologists and veteran parents describe communication patterns. Some kids open up in the morning, some right after school, others at bedtime. Conversational style means that each child responds to a different tone and pacing; each has a different level of comfort with back-and-forth dialogue, questions and phrasing. These differences are apparent from the first years of life and remain relatively constant through adolescence and well beyond. Through thousands of family sessions and “stories from home,” I’ve realized we need to take these characteristics into account

and respond in a fashion that complements a child’s conversational style. Given the peer group, pop culture, and self-regulating video games, kids are used to nothing less.

Fifteen-year-old Collette’s conversational style was to argue—stubbornly, aggressively, immovably. Take a position and Collette immediately took the opposite one—a pattern that alienated her parents and teachers and led to a welter of diagnoses: oppositional and conduct disorders, along with attentional, affective and bipolar disorders.

Her sessions with me were almost endless chains of argument. As I began to understand this and go along with Collette for a while, moments of actual conversation happened along with the debates.

One day, Collette dropped by the debating club at school. The head of the team told her, “You can’t try out for this unless you get better grades.” She came away grumbling and, of course, argued with me about this “senseless” requirement. But after our usual back-and-forth, she also heard my respect for the coach’s position; Collette started to go to a few more classes, and got just enough decent grades to join the team.

Needless to say, Collette was a terrific debater—debating was her natural conversational style. The club introduced her to a new world of like-minded, iconoclastic, argumentative kids; she eventually made the travel team. Her debating ability and sardonic humor were so appreciated by her peers she was elected team president. Gradually, unexpected change stuck to those walls.

In-between Moments Put to Use

So often, post-boomer parents see drop-offs, ferrying children to extracurricular activities, and the intense hour before dinnertime only as logistical challenges and necessary means to an end—they don’t make use of these “in-between” times to engage kids. They don’t realize how open kids are during those “Hello-I-must-be-going” moments. In fact, if (and this is a big “if” these days) family members don’t disappear into their phones, such transitions are a most promising real estate for building communication. Far from incidental, they’re often the only times in which real, nonformulaic conversations take place

Thad, an early adolescent, was obsessed with snowboarding and counterculture music, put off his homework endlessly, partied too much on weekends, and was on the verge of expulsion from school because of near-failing grades—which led Melanie, his highly organized mom, to monitor his every move. To break this destructive dance, I encouraged Melanie to

continue some monitoring, but to use their few quiet, transitional times at home differently. Melanie liked to read before going to bed, and learned to treat this transition time as off-limits for pointed reminders. Thad, who had taken up knitting (snowboarders love colorful, knitted caps), spontaneously began knitting next to her. This taken-for-granted “in-between” gradually became a soothing part of their routine. One evening, Thad unexpectedly opened up about how much he hated his prep school.

Following my coaching, Melanie didn’t pounce on this information. Thad went on to reveal the secrets of snowboarding’s anarchistic world, and almost casually initiated discussions about a girlfriend, sex, weekend drinking, and the isolation he felt in his current school—all of which frightened Melanie, but she was relieved he was telling her more of what was actually going on. Melanie took Thad’s complaints seriously and, with the help of an experienced educational expert, explored different schools. Ultimately, this in-between conversational time resulted in a school setting better suited to Thad’s working-class identity, and he began to come into his own. Sitting together, saying nothing really, had set this life-affirming change into motion.

Frank, a single dad, couldn’t establish any meaningful connection with his withdrawn 4th-grader Gwen; as the distance between them grew, she held back from revealing hurtful experiences in her preteen girl world. I asked him to think about the endless daily transitions and consider one in-between as a place for talking. After going back and forth, he chose to walk Gwen to school. At first she resisted, but I encouraged him to stand firm.

It took several months but, one day out of the blue, Gwen asked for a hug before parting. The next week, she invited Dad into school to meet the office staff. (Post-boomer preteens aren’t always as ashamed of their parents as kids once were.) Frank, now a different sort of listener, offered Gwen advice about feeling excluded by her classmates and the growing online popularity wars—issues that he’d personally experienced. He was touched to see how much his absence for a business trip affected this once-dismissive daughter. Moments of communication had moved them in unexpected directions.

Times Have Changed

As I finish this hopeful piece, I feel sadness for the cases in which I couldn’t budge families from their pain. Looking back, most of those instances contained a common thread: I couldn’t get mothers and fathers, usually

older in years or mindset, to understand that we've entered a new era. Stuck in beliefs about how a family ought to be, the way communication should happen, they were committed to outdated formalities between parent and child.

Hadn't I myself revered "the village" of my childhood? But there was a price for that order: Many of us now grasp how little our parents knew of us, and we understand how much of ourselves we were unable or unwilling to reveal across the generational divide.

Childhood and family life became chaotically unbound in the late 20th- and early 21st-century, but we adults must not be afraid of kids who know no bounds and often question their uncertain mothers and fathers. The more important reality is that post-boomer parents and their children are fellow travelers who want to be known to each other, and move toward their shared humanity—together.

This is the post-boomer era. Times have changed.

Ron Taffel, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist who works with children and families, is the Chairman of the Board of the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy in New York City. He is the author of several books, including *Childhood Unbound: Saving Our Kids' Best Selves*, from which this article is adapted.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

This article first appeared in the 2019 issue of *Parents League Review*.
© 2019 Parents League of New York www.parentsleague.org.