

What do we do when our child is in a therapeutic program?

The life of a parent is often full of surprises and challenges. One of our biggest challenges is how to reach out and get the support we need when our relationships, children, and family dynamics require us to shift and approach life differently than we have been. This need goes up exponentially when you have an unhappy teen in the house tipping each of you into reaction much of the time. Many of us have had to make difficult personal and financial choices to place our unhappy teen into a therapeutic program so they can get the support they need. Although this is a stressful situation, there are also some of the hidden jewels and opportunities for us as parents in this process.

When we have a child acting out, with declining grades, accelerating behavior, challenging or breaking rules everywhere they can, they are indeed asking for help. But what if it is more? What if they are actually doing their best to throw off the thinly disguised façade of balance in the home? What if they are doing all of this to teach us something? Think about it. They are desperately using their own life energy to get our attention. More importantly, they are actually letting us know when we are inconsistent or indecisive, where we disagree with each other as co-parents, and how easily we can be split and manipulated. *They are exposing our weaknesses as parents.*

For many of us, there is something in our family system that invites our kids to act out. Our kids *feel* what goes on in the house. They *feel* the unsaid words between us when we are not in agreement with each other. They *feel* what we aren't saying much more than what we do say. To make it even more challenging, they *feel* our inner stories, the ones we can no longer see in ourselves, the unlive choices or desires of all the coulda, woulda, shoulda's in our lives. Our kids often *feel* our doubts and our fears, and they witness the struggles for power within our relationships. It drives them crazy to witness our oblivious pretenses, and the frustration and pain they experience comes out sideways in school, with changes in lifestyle, and often very dangerous risk taking.

As a parent, when we get this, *really get this*, we have an opportunity to partner with our child. We get an opportunity to co-create a different way of living, being, and interacting as a family and just as important, if not more, as a community of people under the same roof.

We place our child into a program so they can push and shove and act out until they learn to trust that they are being seen and heard, and what they see and hear is honest and consistent. We give them the gift of being with a group of people who can do something for them that we cannot. Once they know they are in safe hands, they begin to loosen the grip of the battle energy they took on in the family, and they begin to unwind into a more relaxed and authentic version of themselves. They are in a program with people who know how to be authentic and trust their gift of

leading an angry adolescent into himself or herself. I believe these staff members are the lucky ones for they get to witness the magic of a young man or young woman unfolding with every day.

While someone else is helping your child calm down into their authentic self, you get to take the time to do the same for yourself. Here is a real nugget for you. Your child always knew who you truly were, inside. They inherently see the inner *you*, and they chose *you* to guide them in this life, to lead them, to steward them into adulthood.

For us, we are left at home with an empty bedroom way earlier than we ever planned. There is silence and the absence of drama, yes, and there is also the ache of the memory of seeing your child in the different rooms of the house, remembering the funny things they used to do, and images of our beautiful child keep popping into our head and hearts randomly throughout the days. There is a grief that takes over that life will not be the same. It is true, it will not. It will not ever be the same.... and this is a good thing.

As parents, we hope we are doing a good job. We hope we are doing a better than we probably are, and we hope no one else sees us struggle. We struggle with many of the new roles we take on such as financial providers, organizing other people, facing lots of surprises and challenges, and adults who understand life. Who actually understands life? When we are really honest with ourselves, we know we really don't understand, we just keep trying to do the best we can. We do know there are layers and many forms of self-denial about how lost we really are. Perhaps we are good at making money, but suck at relationships? Maybe we bury ourselves in all our relationships so we don't have to feel our own feelings? Maybe we disconnect from all of the daily emotions and feelings and just keep our head down to keep up with the frantic pace of life? Whatever it might be, our child witnesses this. All our children witness this.

With each passing year, they witnessed you layering up and hiding your authentic self behind work, stressful responsibilities, mistakes in relationship, and the righteousness of your ego trying to hold all of life together. They have watched you disappear in to yourself.

So now, with the gift of time in a program, knowing our child is safe and growing, we get a chance to hit the "redo" button of our life and take a look at who we are, who we wanted to be, what we like, and what we don't like. *We get the opportunity to get to know ourselves again.*

You have the opportunity to match your child's courage as they take on self-exploration, vulnerability, and emotional pain. They have to be willing every minute of every day to experience a different way of doing relationships, of facing their snarky behavior as a cover up, and being called out on their own honesty. There is fear, pain, and such exposure, week after week, yet they learn to trust this

self-discovery and know how good it feels to get to the other side of this pain. They learn that self-discovery is the truest thing they know.

So the answer to what do we do when our child is in program? We step in to ourselves. We match our child's courage with our own courage. We demonstrate a willingness to submit ourselves to the same courageous path our child is on. We use this opportunity and challenge to dig deep and go after the stories, the hidden truths. We embrace our own personal work with courage. We learn to step into our most authentic self. We begin again to see ourselves with honest eyes. And we share this journey at the same time as our child, independently, in our own way.

Then, when we visit our child, there is the opportunity to share honest selves with honest selves. Honest journeys with honest journeys. This is the gift. This is the hidden jewel, for when a small family unit, just like a small community, gathers together in truth, anything is possible. The world becomes a beautiful place of change and growth.

You are invited to use the precious time of program to step in....