Program Gives Teens Problem-Solving Role

By Adrienne Keith

A teenager is a person in transition. Recent scientific evidence supports this assertion, and Barbara Strauch’s book, The Primal Teen, eloquently reports those findings.

Teenagers are weird, in part, because the teenage brain is "raw, vulnerable [and] still becoming what it will be."¹ Physically, socially, emotionally and neurologically, a teen is on the moving walkway between the dependence of childhood and the independence of adulthood.

As a family law attorney, I see clients in all phases of major transition. Changing people and changing families make a moving target, and it can be extremely difficult to reach resolution in the midst of so much change. I believe that this dynamic quality of family law makes mediation a very effective process for reaching resolution.

Given that a teen is just as much in transition as any family law client, it’s perhaps not surprising that parent-teen mediation is a very effective way for parents and teens to reach resolution within their household. For more than 10 years now, the City of Bellevue’s Parent-Teen Mediation Program has helped families sort through problems, identify issues and set goals that work for everyone. While parents and their teens can come to mediation for any reason, many families have come with disputes about house rules and chores, friendships and dating, privacy and respect, jobs and money, alcohol and drug use, school activities, a teen’s running away, or a parent’s new spouse.

Program Coordinator Cathy Goldman began developing the idea for a parent-teen mediation program during her master’s work on dispute resolution. For her thesis, she set up a pilot mediation program to address truancy in Shoreline high schools. Combining her background as a teacher with her interest in dispute resolution, Goldman wondered whether mediation would be a good forum to address truancy issues. The program was successful and Goldman’s work in Bellevue builds on her experience in Shoreline.

The program uses a team model of two mediators: one adult and one teen. Both teen and adult volunteers are selected from the pool of applicants and together they complete extensive mediation training.

Working with school staff, Goldman recruits teen applicants from public and private Bellevue high schools. She looks for teens with strong verbal and listening skills. Many teens are from a diverse background. Adult volunteers also must have strong communication skills and a desire to help, and they too are from a range of backgrounds.

The adult and teen volunteers share a concern for families and a belief in mediation. Katia, a teen volunteer, became involved because she is interested in communication. As a volunteer, she’s found that her conflict resolution skills enable her to have better relationships with her family and
friends. She's also recognized that listening patiently and checking for understanding — key skills for success in mediation — are the same core skills that are critical to diplomacy and negotiation on a much, much larger stage.

Jacob, another teen volunteer, noted that even during the initial training, he felt that he had gained insight into human nature, an appreciation of the power of open-ended questions, and an ability to recognize and empathize with a person’s emotions.

Bellevue’s co-mediation model allows each mediator to bring a set of eyes, ears and experiences to dealing with the conflict at hand. In particular, teen mediators draw on their training and their experience to help parties bridge the gap between the caring intentions of a parent and a world of high school norms radically different than those the parent experienced.

Adult volunteer Lars Watson has been involved with the program since it started. He remembers one mediation in particular where the teen simply wanted to spend some free time playing computer games. The parents wouldn’t allow it, despite the fact that the teen excelled academically, was actively involved in organized athletics and was musically accomplished.

The parents, who had immigrated to the U.S., were so invested in their child’s success that they didn’t believe it was possible for him to achieve what they wanted and relax the way he wanted. As a result of mediation, however, they were willing to allow their son to use some of his free time to play the computer games he wanted.

Mediation sessions last just one to two hours, but they can be extremely effective in restoring communication and resolving conflict. Parent-teen mediation works because human values transcend age. Through the mediation process, parents and teens are able to hear and understand each other, and connect in a way that they had not thought possible. By working together, parents and teens are able to go from the silent treatment to hugging, crying and laughing.

If you are interested in becoming involved with program, contact the Parent-Teen Mediation Program at 425-452-4091. If you know a parent or teen who could benefit from the program, please consider referring them to this exceptional resource.

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