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Help Children Develop Relationships with Supportive Adults

The third Advisory recommendation for parents and caregivers is:

> **"Help children and adolescents develop strong, safe, and stable relationships with supportive adults like grandparents, teachers, coaches, counselors, and mentors."**

It's super important for young people – in fact, people of all ages – to develop strong stable relationships. We can't emphasize enough that human beings are inherently social, and we need each other for support, guidance, and a deeply personal connection.

Though each of the referenced caregiver groups above provide support and guidance in different ways and play different roles in a child or young person's life, they have some critical methods in common.

All supportive adults in some way:

- **Listen in a non-judgmental way**. Teens want to be heard. It is our job to let them talk, process, and even vent. When we are aware of our tendency to judge and criticize, and instead just listen, it encourages them to open up.
- **Validate feelings**, even if we do not agree with what the teen is doing or believing to generate their feelings (that is where re-direction and guidance comes in). In short, all of our feelings have

personal validity. Yet some based on misconceptions or misperceptions require understanding, processing, and re-consideration – at least the thoughts that underly the feelings.

- **Initiate frequent conversations** about a young person's thoughts, feelings, or situation. Most of the time we are involved in a marathon, not a sprint, when it comes to this kind of conversation. In other words, we are not going to understand or help modify incorrect assumptions or distorted or exaggerated thoughts overnight. We can help them reflect and be mindful of their cognitions in bits and pieces over time.

- **Enlist empathy**, so young people feel we are "walking in their shoes."

- **Provide reflection**, so children and adolescents can better see their own thoughts and feelings. Sometimes we all get lost in our experiences. In short, you help them gain perspective.

- **Support an active and interactive dialogue**. This may include role playing, using methods of cognitive-behavior therapy to "debate" our ways of thinking, or simply brainstorming about the ways of handling sensitive situations (Schlozman, 2013).

- **Intervene with an active directive, if the situation is urgent, potentially dangerous, or threatening**. Suggest resources if a young person is bullied, excluded, the object of microaggressions. Some situations are dangerous and at all times caring adults need to protect youth.

- **Try to become role models our young people will emulate**. At times, we are not always the best role models. It is natural to have our own distractions, self-preoccupations, misuse of substances or digital media. One aspect of modeling healthy behavior is when we take personal accountability for our own failures as role models.

- **Apologize when we get it wrong or misunderstand as a role model**. As mentioned in the previous chapter, with conflict resolution, there is great power in apology and mending a relationship that needs correction.

- **Accept the advice of our child or adolescent**. At times, adults and caregivers can benefit from the observations and wisdom of even our youngest children. When we acknowledge the accuracy and value of advice from our young people, it fundamentally boosts their self-esteem and also reinforces the strength of the relationship.

- **Foster wellbeing** by actively discussing meditation, yoga, exercise, nutrition, good sleep hygiene, and other healthful habits (Schlozman, 2019). And practice what you preach! These techniques are good for all of us, and if we engage in them with our children, adolescents, and young adults, it's even better.

- **Encourage creativity with others** – with family, peers, in schools, in community programs. This might include music, dance, graphic art, or an illuminated collage (Clay Center, 2019). Creativity gives our brains a boost.

Now, let's look at how different groups of supportive adults may provide specific guidance based on their relationship with young people.

Grandparents

Grandparents play a special role in the family (Beresin, 2020). They are often the purveyors of wisdom, experience, family narratives, and may not only develop close, loving relationships with children and adolescents, but also provide some childcare, giving parents some personal time apart from caregiving – and parents certainly need a break!

Here are a few things grandparents can do to fulfill the need for supportive relationships with youth.

- **Take care of the grandchildren.** This not only allows for personal time for parents, but over time, builds strong attachment. Then they become important adults in the life of a child – someone the child or teen goes to for all sorts of assistance.

- **Give advice to your young and adult children**. Remember that grandparents are far more experienced than you as a parent and can provide advice on difficulties at home such as getting kids to bed, managing separation anxiety, making suggestions in managing oppositional behavior, helping with picky eating. And if there are difficulties in a parent's life such as economic problems, divorce, or loss of loved ones, grandparents may be crucial for supporting both parents and kids.

- **Support parental rules (and at times spoil the children!).** When kids hear that rules need to be followed from other supports beyond their parents, it reinforces the importance of parental requirements for behavior. And grandparents can "spoil" the kids with rewards. Grandparents have a unique place in both supporting the rules but also "bending" them in ways that parents cannot and should not do – what can be better than a second dessert or staying up a tad late!

- **Tell family narratives**. Kids love family stories and grandparents are often the purveyors of a wealth of tales about the family – our moments of glory as well as tragedy. These stories convey perspective and the bigger picture of how the family has dealt with hard times and survived. For example, my now adult children always loved hearing about my own mother's stories of coping during the Great Depression, and playing piano in department stores for spare change.

Teachers

Your child probably spends more time in school than anywhere else. In this setting many teachers get to know your child pretty well. As parents, we all hear about a teacher who is their "favorite," and this typically indicates that they feel a sense of understanding, respect, and confidence in their relationship. In addition, some teachers may become confidants for your child.

Beyond the general skills noted above, a trusted teacher may help your child in the following ways.

- **Provide insight for you and your child** in several areas. Teachers can observe and report on academic strengths and weaknesses; possible learning disabilities; behavioral tendencies that either help them (like supporting other kids, calling out bullies), or conversely hinder their development (like interrupting, making public negative comments about other kids, or acting impulsively in ways that disrupt their relationships or the group). Talk with their teachers frequently to give you and your child feedback that is not colored by family relationships or potential biases you may have. This tends to make it more "objective."

- **Make observations pertinent to mental health challenges**. In a structured environment, such as school, teachers are in an excellent position to recognize developmental or cognitive weaknesses that may require assessment, or emotional and behavioral issues that may indicate a psychiatric disorder, such as depression or anxiety. By empathically talking with students and parents, teachers – through their experience, and a trusted relationship with a young person – let us know if they see that something is wrong. Something that perhaps merits a referral to an adjustment counselor, a core evaluation by your school district, or an outside psychological or psychiatric evaluation (Felopulos, 2014; Braaten, 2017).

Coaches

An often untapped resource for kids, teens, and young adults are coaches (Beresin & Booth Watkins, 2022). They foster social skills (beyond athletic training) that are critical for resilience and social-emotional learning. Coaches do not "grade" kids. If good at what they do, they help a teen to feel empowered and included in a team structure, and help to support their peers.

Here are some contributions made by coaches beyond teaching sports-specific athletic skills.

- **Promote life-long personal emotional and behavioral skills**. Coaches help young people fit in with a team structure; learn to be leaders and role models as part of a group; accept and tolerate adversity and loss with grace; and learn to embody respectful competition without anger or resentment – but rather with respect for one's opponent. Coaches help young people tolerate anxiety, frustration, and cope with the inherent uncertainty in sports. They help them maintain positive self-esteem and motivation to achieve. Above all, coaches are the ultimate role models, who support and provide comfort for a young person's errors, allowing them to appreciate and learn from their mistakes. All of this is super important, not just on the playing field, but in life.

- **Help contain parental pressure**. We all want our kids to be winners. We all want them to be the best they can be. But it is far too common for parents get a bit out of line when rooting for their kids. We aren't always the best examples of good sportsmanship (Schlozman, 2018). Coaches can help parents support their kids without going overboard.