

Being an Adult in a Teenage World

BY SUE PORTER

When I first started working in high schools almost 20 years ago, my young faculty friends and I would occasionally spend our limited free time playing a game of comparing ourselves, as the high school students we were, to our current students. The first round of the game was called “Who I Was Then.” It entailed going through the student-body roster and deciding which student most closely matched our own high school selves. Round two of the game, called “Who I Wanted to Be Then,” usually involved an exploration of our perceived shortcomings as high school students, considering that the answers to the questions of rounds one and two were almost never the same. With time permitting, we proceeded to round three and asked ourselves, “Who Do I Want to Be Now?” Depending on our relative states of mental health, we might even play a bonus round entitled “Who I Wanted to Date Then.”

This game was fun and silly and stupid, and reflected our fascination with our students. It also reflected the fact that, as new teachers, we were trying to make sense of ourselves as adults working in a teenage world. We were not that far off in age from our students, and yet worlds apart. This contrast fascinated me then, and continues to fascinate me now that I am a school counselor. In fact, I spend a lot of my time now talking with teachers about it in an effort to help them understand adolescents better — and understand themselves better. I’ve learned that the more high school teachers are able to explore who they are as adults working in a teenage world, the better off they’ll be — and this is good not only for the teachers, but for their students and their schools.

### **Virus of Adolescence**

As any high school teacher can tell you, teenagers are a

handful — sometimes a handful of fun, sometimes of trouble, but always a handful. Teenagers live in a world of constant flux and uncertainty. Their emotional, social, and cognitive worlds are in a state of perpetual motion. I like to use the metaphor of a virus to explain the teenage condition. But before I explore this metaphor, let me say that I do not mean to suggest that adolescence is pathological. Rather, I use the viral metaphor because the adolescent experience can be so contagious. This is part of the joy of working with teenagers. Their enthusiasm, idealism, and *joie de vivre* can be infectious. But their moodiness and self-absorption can be infectious, too. So, I like to think that the adolescent psyche is like a virus in this way — it's catching.

You don't have to observe teenagers for long to see how this process works. Teenagers affect each other's moods and attitudes in feverish ways, in part because teenagers respond to each other unconsciously, and often collectively and negatively. When adults are around teenagers all day they become susceptible, too. The virus of adolescence is robust, so it has a profound effect on everyone in the teenage world. Nevertheless, in the midst of this teenage hot zone teachers are expected to behave as though they have immunity. They are supposed to respond consciously and positively and think for themselves while considering the perspectives of others. In the face of teenage chaos, teachers are supposed to stand firm, be certain, and remain consistent. I believe it is their ability to be firm and certain and consistent — to have immunity to the virus of adolescence — that marks teachers as grownups and provides students with some of the most important lessons they will learn in high school. But this is easier said than done.

### **Psychological vs. Chronological Adulthood**

Many people confuse advancing age with adulthood. We get older, our bodies change, we learn a few things and then—boom!—we are adults. For

some of us, this might be the case. But for most of us, true adulthood is an earned distinction, not one bestowed on us by time. This is a point I make to new and old teachers alike. Teachers must remember that it is not enough to be mere chronological adults with their students. They must aspire to be psychological adults.

What does it mean to be a psychological adult? In addition to being firm, calm, and consistent, it means being able to immerse oneself in the teenage world without becoming part of it. Psychological adults are able to live comfortably in the hot zone of teenage chaos and paradox while holding fast to uncomfortable or unpopular positions. Psychological adults can contain the fever in their own worlds without spreading germs. At the same time, they are also able to help others who are infected — *i.e.*, their teenage students. This is what good teachers do everyday.

How can we measure whether or not we are psychological adults? What does psychological adulthood look like in practice?

### **Identifying with vs. Relating to Teenagers**

As the game I used to play suggests, many new teachers feel they have more in common with their students than they do with senior faculty. (None of us was playing “Which Senior Faculty Member Do I Resemble Most?”) New teachers are still cool; they still have a grasp on teenage culture — the language, the clothes, the music. Teachers in their 30s and 40s can seem ancient to new teachers. The older faculty members — they're the adults. New teachers understand the teenage world because they still identify with it. They can still picture themselves there. In truth, most teachers can still picture themselves as teenagers to some extent. But identifying with and relating to teenagers are different things, and, although most teachers can identify with teenagers on some level, this identification can be a liability, not an asset, to teaching. What

teachers, as psychological adults, should be able to do is relate to students without feeling emotionally close to the teenage situation. Letting personal stuff get in the way is exactly what many young teachers (or chronological adults of any age) do when they start identifying with students. This is when teachers feel too close, too sensitive, too invested in their students. We all know teachers who get dangerously close to the teenage world in this way — teachers who yearn to be considered popular or hip by the students, or teachers who engage in idle gossip with students, or who share too much information about their personal lives.

Students on the receiving end of this kind of behavior, even if they encourage it, are instantly at risk. At first, they may be thrilled that a teacher is identifying with them. They may feel special and important. But gradually they are likely to feel pressure to continue responding to the teachers' needs. In the best-case scenario, they will eventually get bored and separate themselves from the teacher. In the worst-case scenario, students get caught up in a complicated emotional relationship that not only undermines their ability to learn, but that also threatens their overall well-being.

### **Self-Directed vs. Other-Directed Behavior**

One way for adults to gauge the appropriateness of their behavior with students is to be vigilant about motivation. To this end, I like to make the distinction with teachers between self-directed and other-directed behavior. When teachers behave like psychological adults, their behavior is other-directed. When they behave like chronological adults, their behavior is self-directed. Teachers must ask themselves key questions: Am I sharing information about myself with my students because it is good for them or because it serves me? Am I eating lunch with my students because I have lunch duty or because I want to feel

worshipped and included by the same kids who rejected me in high school? Teachers sometimes think that sharing personal information (or being buddies with the students, or being cool) will let students know they understand and care about them. This is a critical, common mistake.

Students become confused when they have to contend with selfish teachers. It's hard enough for them to deal with their own self-absorption. When the dynamic in the relationship shifts in this way, students are not sure what to do. If a math teacher regales her students with information about her painful divorce, should the students try to comfort her or try to steer the conversation back to math? If a teacher becomes petulant because his students don't consider him cool and popular, how should students respond to this kind of insecurity and narcissism? In addition to feeling confused and pressured, students may also feel embarrassed for themselves and the teacher alike. Teenage embarrassment is stressful, and increased stress is a great predictor of reduced performance, so teacher self-directed behavior can affect students in many ways.

Does this mean teachers should never be themselves around students? Of course not. Teachers just need to make sure that their behavior benefits their students, not only themselves. Sometimes it is very helpful for students to know their teachers as people, not just as teachers. I know of students who have been saved by teachers who shared something personal about themselves at the right moment. But those teachers were always acting in the service of the student.

### Responding vs. Reacting

Another way in which teachers can measure their behavior is to consider the distinction between responding and reacting in the teenage world. Generally, psychological adults respond while chronological adults react. Let me explain.

One of the things that can be so frustrating about working with teenagers is their reactivity. They often don't have the emotional or neurological capacity to take a step back and consider their words or actions. They can be impulsive and unpredictable because they are reacting to every thought and emotion they have. Psychological adults have grown out of this tendency. Instead of reacting impulsively to situations, they respond thoughtfully. They are able to consider multiple possibilities in a situation; they can attend to competing needs simultaneously; and they can see through chaos to the still center of the storm. Then they act. In other words, they act, they don't react. This is what I call being responsive.

Teenagers are wily, though. They have an amazing capacity to get adults to react rather than respond. How do they do it? This is the genius of the virus. Because teenagers often look (and sound and dress and have sex and drive cars) just like adults, adults tend to let their guards down around teenagers. Teenagers can appear so mature and bright that adults mistakenly give them credit for a level of maturity they haven't yet attained. Real maturity, psychological adult-level maturity, can be gauged by its consistency, and teenagers are anything but consistent. The point here is that teachers shouldn't be fooled. Regardless of how smart or mature some students may seem, they are not adults. More to the point, if teenagers are going to become psychological adults one day, teachers must respond to them appropriately while they are still teenagers.

In my experience, this is the issue the average teacher wrestles with most. Even experienced teachers can fall prey to the factors in their own lives that increase the likelihood of being reactive with teenagers instead of responsive — factors like fatigue, hunger, stress, moodiness. When these factors get the better of teachers and they become reactive, they are no longer fulfilling their role as teachers. One teacher I know, when feeling

stressed by his workload, snapped at his students with comments about his low pay. Not only did his comments sidetrack the class, they also served as biting, adolescent-like rejoinders to the teenage reactivity in the out-of-control classroom.

Often the only thing preventing students from feeling the bite of the teenage virus is the presence of an adult in the room. When that adult loses control, it can be a very scary prospect. Almost all students want their teacher to be in control. Indeed, they need their teacher to be in control.

### Needs vs. Wants

The final way teachers can stay out of the teenage hot zone is to respond to the needs of their students, not to their wants. The reason it is important to be responsive and not reactive is because teenagers will often ask for what they *want*, which isn't necessarily what they *need*. If teachers react to student desires, they might miss the real educational moments, which come when students get what they need. Therefore, when teachers respond to their students they should ask themselves whether they are responding to need or want.

When students get what they want they are usually happy in the short run. When they divert a classroom discussion, or convince a teacher to forfeit the quiz, it makes them feel powerful. But fulfilling a desire at the expense of a need is like eating ice cream for breakfast — it tastes good, but it isn't healthy in the long run. Chronological adults are suckers for giving students ice cream when they need brown rice. This is what makes some chronological adults so popular. But once the ice cream is served, the students are in control. When students have too much control, it not only diminishes their respect for their teacher and their learning, it makes them feel unsafe.

On the other hand, when students get what they need, they feel respected and respectful, and often much more motivated. Despite how unconscious

teenagers can seem, they are also able to sniff out what is good for them and appreciate it eventually.

Does all of this mean teachers should never have fun with their students again? On the contrary. I am not suggesting teachers throw wet blankets on themselves and pull away from their students. If they're anything like me, they like working with teenagers because teenagers are fun. It can be exhilarating to be in the teenage world. But teachers must proceed with caution. Psychological adults with good boundaries do not enter their students' worlds and act in kind. As long as teachers' interest in their students is in service of the students, it's OK. But when it becomes about fulfilling the teachers' needs, then the teachers have become infected with the teenage bug, broken their contract of good faith with students, and failed as educators.

### **How Schools Can Help Teachers; How Teachers Can Help Each Other**

Being an adult in a teenage world takes a lot of work. Schools and teachers must make a commitment to explore themselves in a way most other professionals never have to. This is the price of raising and evaluating children. The following are some suggestions that will help schools and teachers live up to the challenge of psychological adulthood by establishing and maintaining best practices within the school community.

My first suggestion is for schools to engage in a process of self-examination to determine what standards currently exist that serve to support or undermine psychologically adult behavior within the school. Schools should be alert for what I like to call the "Cult of Personality," wherein the community supports excessive popularity of adults by students. There will always be popular teachers, but schools become vulnerable when adult popularity is an important currency within the system.

Second, once standards of behavior have been agreed upon, schools and

teachers must do their part to support psychologically adult behavior. For instance, teachers should discuss and agree upon protocol for adult behavior in community events, such as sports, all-school meetings, etc. If all adults agree to hold the line with students in established ways, then everyone's job will be easier.

Third, schools should make explicit the expectation for certain adult behavior during the hiring process. Questions aimed at discovering how a prospective teacher responds to various situations can help gauge whether that teacher will be able to meet the agreed-upon expectations.

Fourth, schools should establish a system of mentoring new teachers. The aim is to support the teachers' psychological and professional development. New teachers and young adults need modeling from their elders and each other. Schools should also consider creating a support group for new teachers to supplement the mentoring program.

Fifth, create a forum in which teachers can explore these issues with each other. For best results, the forum should be voluntary and facilitated by the school counselor, a senior or trusted faculty member, or an outside consultant. I facilitated a group like this for five years at one school and it was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my career. The teachers were free to explore all aspects of their relationships with students, and in so doing supported and learned from each other. A group like this also serves to mitigate the effects of the isolation of teaching, a liability for everyone in the profession.

Finally, schools and teachers should support the cultivation of teachers' lives and interests outside school (this is needed particularly at boarding schools). Schools and teachers are vulnerable when teachers live vicariously through their students. When teachers look to students and the school to fill their social needs everyone is at risk. Teachers need to get a life, and schools must support

this if they want to cultivate a healthy environment.

*Sue Porter is the school counselor at Boston University Academy (Massachusetts).*