

Program title: The Role Parents Should Have in the Lives of Their Teens Podcast

Episode transcript:

Intro voiceover:

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Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody.

One day, you have an affectionate little human who wants to be with you all the time. Then everything changes. I want to say at this point that I was given a script that describes a teen as, quote, "a sometimes moody adolescent who finds fault with everything that you do."

Well, again, my name is Bruce Moody and I can tell you that I was a moody adolescent, uppercase "M," and lowercase. I definitely lived up to my name. I can say, from personal experience, that adolescence is a confusing time for both kids and their parents. But as much as your teen pushes you away, parents are more important than ever during this stage. And many parents don't understand their influence, especially in the lives of their older teens.

So, we'll talk about this today with our guest, who is Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg. He is a pediatrician specializing in adolescent medicine at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. He is a professor of pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine, and co-founder and director of programs at the Center for Parent and Teen Communications.

Dr. Ginsburg has written extensively about what happens during adolescence and the role parents should have in the lives of their teens. His newly released title is "Congrats – You're Having a Teen! Strengthening Your Family and Raise a Good Person," which paints a different picture on the parent-teen relationship. Dr. Ginsburg, welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg:

Bruce, it is a joy and honor to be here. Thank you for wanting me to share this knowledge.

Bruce:

And we're looking forward to you doing just that. So, let's begin. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, and your background, and how that brings us here?

Kenneth:

Yeah. I am a pediatrician. I specialize in adolescent medicine, meaning that I support young people to become their best selves. It means that I think about their physical health, as well as their emotional and their behavioral health. It has been truly one of the great honors of my lifetime to be serving to military families since about 2006. And I have worked very closely with military families, the Military Child Education Coalition, in particular, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America Military Families, to try to support military families to build and maintain resilience even during the deployment cycles.

Bruce:

That's really interesting, and there's a lot to unpack there. Let's just begin with perhaps a very, very broad question: What role should parents have in the life of their teens?

Kenneth:

To be the person who knows your child fully and loves them completely. That's it.

Why, Bruce, why do we love? We love so that human beings know they're worthy of being loved. Who are parents? Parents are the people who know who their kids are. They know all that is good and right, and their complexities, and their limitations. What are parents' roles? To be the people in their kids' lives even during those moments when they're moody, that they stand by them, that they show up, that their love is unconditional, that is protective beyond description.

Bruce:

So, are you describing a scenario in which you hear words, you see actions, but you have a different response to those particular words and those particular actions? That you're seeing a different picture that the teen is not seeing? Or maybe a different picture that the teen is afraid or unaware of to acknowledge?

Kenneth:

I think you're getting closer. I think the issue is that it is for parents to see kids as they deserve to be seen. As they really are, not through the lens of their behaviors. That is what parents can do.

During your introduction, Bruce, you made a very, very important point. You pointed out that the presence of parents is perhaps more important than at any other time during human development, except for maybe between zero and three, where you have to feed them to keep them alive. But now is the time you nurture them to be able to thrive, to know who they really are.

And so, what's happening, in general, for adolescents is that they are judged fully by their behaviors. Whether it's in school, whether it's by other teens, so many people see

what they're doing and then describe the teen as who they are based on what they're doing.

A parent's opportunity is to really see who the kid is, their character strengths, all that is good and right, and those strengths they have yet to develop. Because I have the audacity to have defined love. Love is literally seeing someone as they deserve to be seen, not based on the behavior. And, Bruce, love is different than liking. You don't have to like the behavior. But if you want to bring your child back to being their best self, you love who they are.

Bruce:

So, as you're loving the child, the teen, for who they are, how are you dealing with the emotions and the pushback? Are there cues to look for that indicate, well, I have an in here, or should I wait a few minutes, or should I meet volume with volume? What should a parent be looking for when they're trying to get into the heads of their teen?

Kenneth:

Yeah, so you want to be present and available, and understand that the teen is the expert in their own life. They may or may not be ready to talk to you in this moment, but they rely on you fully.

In your introduction, Bruce, you said that you have these adorable little children who want to spend all their time with you and everything changes during adolescence. That is simply not accurate. It may look accurate from the outside, but every piece of research that's been done shows that adolescents want to be with their parents, want to know their parents' values, and want their parents to accept them fully.

So, what you need to do, Bruce, to start, is to understand development. To understand that adolescence is absolutely a confusing time. Why? Because it's the time where you are trying, you are answering the most fundamental and most difficult question in the world, which is, who am I? Very confusing.

It's also the time where you have to become very independent and figure out how to do things on your own. What does that mean? It means that while you're trying to become independent, just a normal human reaction is to resent the fact that you're not yet independent.

Who are parents? Parents are the people who did everything for you when you were little. So, yes, they temporarily push us away or may push us away. I don't want you to have any expectations that things are going to be tough. But they may push us away as they are learning to stand on their own. When we handle this phase of their life well, that's when this pushing you away will diminish. But during these moments, when you said meet volume with volume, the answer is absolutely not. Because if the kid is, "I hate you so much." And you're like, "Well, I hate you more." Guess what?

And when the kid is trying to become independent, and slams the door, because they need their own room. And you go equal and opposite, and open the door because you

say, "It's my house. I can go anywhere." That's volume for volume. But it flies in the face of development. If instead when your kid says, "I hate you," you go, "I still love you, I'm going to be in the other room. Knock when you're ready." And when they slam the door, you just whisper through it, "I see you need space. I'm available when you want me." So, they don't need you to go volume for volume. They need you to be a stable presence in their life who never stops loving.

Bruce:

That stable presence. How does that carry in the head of a teen as they go out the door? So, I'm thinking about harmful behaviors that teens, they're probably way more prevalent than when I was growing up. Problems online, problems with drugs, problems with other types of negative behaviors. How do you empower a child, before they go out the door, that gets ahead of these negative behaviors?

Kenneth:

Multiple answers to that question, Bruce. The first is, you see the child as they are. You see what's good and right about them, that reinforces for them what their values are. It is your knowledge of who their kid is that is their North Star. They know who they're supposed to be. You then also give them the facts to make sure that they're aware of the dangers. For example, of drugs or of online predators or of putting your information out there and it lasts forever. You give them the information. Then you make it clear, "I am your lifeline. You can always come to me no matter what."

And I'll give you one example. Something I love doing is making sure that every family has a code word. So, in your dreams, Bruce, you would go to a party and a kid would say, "Hey, you want to smoke this?" And I would go, "I'm sorry. I will not participate that because it's inconsistent with my values." We'd love our kids to talk like that, but they don't. And it's too hard to call down your friends. But what's normal in teen culture is to say, "Are you kidding? My mother would kill me." Or, "My mother ruins my life. My mother smells me when I get home." So, what do you do? You give them knowledge, you give them the knowledge that they can always, or the awareness, that they can always come to you.

And then you give them code word. Now, I'm at the party. Now, drugs come out. And I text my mom, and I drop her a code word that says, "Hey, get me out of here." And my mom knows what it is. It might be, "Hey, left too soon to walk Spotty." But if I said "walk Spotty" on a text, my mom knows to text back, "What do you mean? You're supposed to be home. Don't you remember that your aunt was coming over? Get home now. Do you want me to pick you up?" You give them the way out to live to their values. And that acknowledges a couple of major points. Families are vital. And it acknowledges that to exist in the teen world, you can't always be looking morally superior. You have to deal with your reality of keeping your friends and doing the right thing. That code word allows you to do that.

Bruce:

OK. Also allowing you to do that is just the personal strength, to be centered in order to do that. It's one thing to, we've just read your book and listened to the podcast. We've got the head knowledge. But how does a parent maintain their state of mind? And so, what are the opportunities to reclaim energy in between when a child is out and also to prepare for a stressful situation?

Kenneth:

So, I might sound like a broken record, but it gets back to that love and knowing who our child really is. And there might be moments where our child is not behaving to their capabilities. Then here's what I want you to do. I want you to remind yourself why you care so much. If you are furious, it's because you care. You don't get furious at strangers. If you are worried, it's because you love. You remind yourself why. You remind yourself who your kid really is. And if you have to get together with a friend, a spouse, a neighbor, to remind you of all that was good in writing your child when they were 5 years old, to re-enter yourself on what is good. But remember this, the worst thing that can happen, in our relationships, is for our children to feel they've lost us.

Under no circumstances whatsoever do you ever say, you're cut off or I'll never forgive you. Or if you do this, don't come back to this house. Every child needs to know they have a way back in. And this whole model of knowing what is good and right about your child and keep loving, even if there are moments when you're not liking, that is the roadmap back home for your child. And what I do in my work, and in my latest book, is literally give scripts about how to welcome the kid back into your life. And at the Center for Parent and Teen Communication, we have a website called parentandteen.com. It's completely free.

And do you know what one of the most searched for items is? It's young people, even though we're not putting stuff out there saying find us, but last year about 50,000 young people were searching for, "How do I reconnect or regain trust with my parents?"

Bruce:

Wow.

Kenneth:

Great. Amen. Amen. It is a myth that they want to break from us and not come back. What they want is to become interdependent with us. But that only happens if you honor their growing independence. If you become super controlling, then to fulfill their developmental role, which is to be able to stand on their own, they will push you away. But if you honor their independence and let them know, you know what I am, I'm the person who knows you fully and loves you completely.

Bruce:

You mentioned, near the top, that you've worked very closely with military families. How would you take what you've been talking about here today, and kind of direct that

toward the stresses of say, a deployment. We're talking about military families and the stressors kind of unique to military life.

Kenneth:

The first thing to remember about every military family is that they're a family first. I want everyone listening to know that everything I'm saying that is most important applies to you as well. But there are unique stressors. And the first stressor is a physical separation. And because there's physical separation, it's, I believe, vitally important that both parents remain very involved in discipline. Meaning to teach or to guide, not to punish or control. For example, if you go to parentandteen.com, or you read my work specifically for military families. But if you go to parentandteen.com, you put in the word military, you will see a behavioral contract. That is something that every family in America can use. But I develop specifically for military families because of separation. Because if we have contracts beforehand, then that means that even if let's say the mom is deployed, then the dad is the primary caretaker at home, then the dad can say, "Well, your mom and I agreed on that." And you bring her present even though she's physically absent.

And let me say one other thing, and I say this with such deep love and affection for military families. I have goosebumps right now, honestly. I cannot tell you what an honor it has been to work with these families. But let me tell you something that sometimes your children suffer from, and that is perfectionism. They become very good little boys and girls because one or both parents are away and what they learn is to not cause trouble. In the worst-case scenario, they learn they have to cause trouble to get attention. But that's rare. What they learn is, I don't want to cause any trouble because my mom's already going through so much because she's in charge of the whole household and there's four of us. I'm going to be a perfect little boy or girl.

And then sometimes we also say these lines like, "Well, your dad's away. You're the man of the house now." And that creates something called "adultification." Where you actually have military children, or children in general, who feel like they don't have time to make the mistakes of childhood because they're an adult. That also leads to this kind of perfectionism.

What do we want to do instead? We want to have the "don't spare me" conversation. "You're right. Your dad's away. And you're right, I'm really stressed and I'm like, mom, dad, grandpa, I'm all of it. But you know what I see you doing, darling, I see you really working really hard to protect me, and to not sometimes show me what's going on in your life. And on the one hand, gosh, I appreciate how strong you are. But what's important to me, being your mom or being your dad, it's the most important job I have. And when you spare me to try to protect me, you're actually preventing me from doing what's most important to me. I beg you, be a child just a little bit longer. Be a child and don't spare me. Come to me when you need me. I'll find the strength to be there. We're in this together." That's the message, the just "don't spare me" message.

I have other concepts as well for military families, but those would be the keys that I really want to point out. Your kids are special. You know what I am going to do one more, Bruce, forgive me. But let's remember what some of the benefits of being a military child are. If you read the stuff I write, I talk so much about the protective importance of having a sense of meaning and purpose, a responsibility to other people, to know that you matter, that you're doing something for your community. So out in the regular world, I've got to wave that flag real high sometimes, in the military world, every single military child knows what commitment and service means. They know what responsibility to community means. And let me make no mistake about it, that is deeply, deeply protective to them far into the future. So, just as we discuss the challenges of being a military family, let's elevate and celebrate the benefits of being a military family as well.

Bruce:

I love what you have to say. And I'm thinking about the concept of perfectionism. It seems like a lot of what you're saying is you really need to walk before you can run. And the purpose of being a young person is to bump and fall, and make some wrong turns, and learn from each bump and fall and wrong turn. And then as a refined individual, you arrive at adulthood. And you don't want to deprive a young person of that important learning experience.

Kenneth:

I just want to give you an amen. I mean, I could say the same thing you just said, and repeat it, but you said it perfectly, Bruce. If you don't make mistakes during childhood, you're going to make them during adulthood. Let's let them make mistakes while they're under our protective eye.

Bruce:

Do you have any suggestions for parents, with regard to kids just, they seem to be pulled in so many different directions. The schedules that they have. Classes starting early, buses picking them up way earlier than that. Clubs and teams, athletics, homework, perhaps a part-time job. And then the time that they do have to themselves, it's increasingly eaten up by screen time. What does that do to a teen? And what can a parent do to kind of defend the space that they need to basically just relax and rest?

Kenneth:

You know what, I don't usually like this to be about me. But I, you know, I write a lot of books and I have these blocks about when concepts are going to happen, and then suddenly I'll be in the shower when I think I'm not thinking. And then the whole idea comes to me. Downtime is exactly when ideas get solidified and creativity flows. So, Bruce, the level of overscheduling you're talking about is not healthy, not just for kids, but for human beings, even grownups. And we know, scientifically, that lessons from school are solidified sometimes during downtime. We know that play is important for young children to just, not only have downtime, but to learn the lessons that you're just

not going to learn sitting in a classroom. I very, very much urge parents to protect time for young children to do nothing.

Bruce:

Totally understand what you're talking about. Dr. Ginsburg, it is wonderful to know that you're in our corner. It is great to have you with us. Do you have any final thoughts on the subject?

Kenneth:

I don't know a perfect final thought except for to circle back and understand that we worry about our children because of how intensely we love them. And your job as a parent is to let your kid make a lot of mistakes so they can grow out into adulthood. But when they were 2 years old, you let them knock over the blocks, you didn't let them put the hand on the stove.

I want you, during adolescence, to very clearly distinguish what are the hand-on-the-stove moments versus the mistakes we allow. Where we get into trouble in parenting adolescents is becoming so over controlling that we don't let them get their hands dirty in the cookie batter like when they were 2. And then children run away from us. But if we let them make mistakes, and we don't control them, but at the same time we have firm and clear boundaries beyond which they cannot stray, those hand-on-the-stove things. And you may not do this. Why? Because I love you too much to allow you to be in danger. You set up the boundaries, but if they're within those boundaries, and you're role modeling for them what it means to be a healthy adult, you're cool.

Bruce:

There's a lot to cover here. And I'm sure we'd love to have you back and continue this discussion.

Kenneth:

You know, I'm always available for military families. You know that.

Bruce:

Well, thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg. And we want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We are a website, a call center. We're all over social media. And now we're a podcast. We hope you'll subscribe to this podcast because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks for listening. Bye-bye.