

# The Golden Path for teenagers

Gill Avery and Mike Vernon explain how The Golden Path can help in navigating adolescent relationships

**"I don't understand it.** My friends are scared to tell their parents their exam results, while I know that you will work with me to help me improve!" said a 13-year-old girl we know well.

We believe that Golden Path-style parenting has contributed to her feelings of confidence in her relationship with her parents. In a previous article (JUNO Issue 22, Winter 2010) we described how The Golden Path could be learnt and used as a tool to navigate parent-child relationships, from birth up to ages 9 to 13, in a way that grows both our children and ourselves.

The physiological, neurological and hormonal changes that take place around puberty (usually between 9 and 13 years of age) are very considerable. According to what we understand from neuroscience, there is a shift in the neural architecture of the individual, with as many as 20% of neuronal connections being pruned during the early teenage years.

## we work to turn our child's attention from just themselves to themselves and other people

Whilst this pruning lays the foundations for the acquisition of more focused and abstract forms of conceptual knowledge, it is also accompanied by a heightened awareness of the effect of what other people do – especially friends and peers – and by a progressive separation from parental influence.

Our task as the parents of our teenagers is to work with our emerging adults to equip them with the ability to apply The Golden Path to themselves and to all sorts of social interactions that matter to them. No longer are they 'receiving' the principles of The Golden Path through parental behaviour and example, but they will now need to learn to use it for themselves and in their relationships.

Hence there is a shift in the way in which we interact with our teenager: we work to turn our child's attention from just themselves to themselves and other people. In this way they can develop the ability to understand that people have different needs from their own and that these needs have to be taken into account in successful relationships. The Golden Path aims to support our teenagers in honouring their own needs at the same time as honouring those of the people who matter to them.



This is crucial because adolescents are sometimes willing to sacrifice their own needs to belong to their peer group. Moreover, given our sex, drugs and rock culture, they need the confidence to draw boundaries for their own future wellbeing.

The process of supporting a young adolescent in acquiring social skills in the form of The Golden Path, which they can apply to peers, friends and others who matter to them, requires our investment and sharing of time and space with them to explore what they think, feel and want to do. We start introducing more consciously what we parents think and feel; we bring into the dialogue how their actions impact on us, allowing them to continue to understand about other people's needs in addition to their own. As our teenagers experience this interaction with their parents, they will then allow it to shine through in other contexts, including with their peers.

This process may sometimes need tough conversations; it is not about ideal harmony but about unravelling and sharing the essential internal processes that we in this culture tend to leave unspoken and immensely unrecognised (for example "And how did you feel when your friend said that?" or "I don't want to do that because I worry about what they will think of me...")

Supporting a young adolescent in gaining social skills parallels their first physical steps – but this time as parents we are more acutely aware of the implications of falling over.

We can now use The Golden Path as 'a way of interacting with others', and transform the steps to reflect this. Thus >

**Welcome** becomes the capacity to care for another. The teenager welcomes their own and others' feelings and what others do, and starts to understand that not everybody feels the same.

**Recognition** becomes the ability to *understand* and *empathise* with another's psychological and emotional needs. Our teenager recognises that they have choice over the way they respond to what others do: "This meets my needs. I wonder if it meets yours..."

**Support** becomes the *management of relationships* in which resources are allocated as fairly as humanly possible (the grown-up version of encouraging 3-year-olds to 'share'): "I wonder how we can make it work for both of us..."

**Strengthening** means that a *strong sense of self* enables our emerging adult to step into situations in which consequences are simply a means of learning how to be more effective in social settings and in key relationships. The inbuilt assumption is that social encounters are a process for learning; consequences are a marker, a response to our actions that shows us where to continue growing.

Establishing the **parting and returning mood** builds our instinct for nurturing relationships. There is a big difference between parting aggressively after having argued, and parting in a mood of looking forward to welcoming the other when we next meet. Parting in the mood that we wish to rejoin leads us to meet again and to be able to welcome, recognise, support and strengthen each other.

## **social encounters are a process for learning**

As parents, we need to understand that our aspiring adults establish themselves through testing our patience again, again and again at the most awkward times. It therefore behoves us to

- continue to welcome and care for them,
- acknowledge and recognise the distinctive issues they are dealing with, and
- support their ability to solve the problems that life brings, in a way that
- strengthens their capacity to continuously learn their way through to a good resolution with those who matter to them.

When working through this stage with our adolescents it seems important to apply patiently our Golden Path again and again whilst simultaneously managing our own internal reactions to events, and to make our reactions progressively more explicit and discussible so that we place ourselves on the learning path of our young adult. Parents can now be the first people to provide a mirror through which teenagers can see a vision of themselves as mature adults, in healthy, productive relationships. In turn, they will become responsible for enacting The Golden Path for their offspring and grandchildren.

Some people speak of ancestral problems – a repeating pattern of dysfunctional behaviour that is inherited through families over generations. If that is true, it must also be possible to inherit a family nurturing strategy that develops capable, mature people, competent at self-direction in their lives, their relationships and their own parenting.

### **Mike's story**

Let me tell you about Hilda. She lives forever in my heart, for although not directly related to me, she adopted a golden-path ethos towards me. I didn't know this at the time and have only recently been able to conceptualise her gift to me in this way.

When I was a young adolescent, Hilda not only made me feel welcome, but exhibited a great deal of care (of the nonsense farming community kind) in the way in which she related to me. Without any hesitation or debate, she included me in all family matters, even sensitive discussions. She recognised my need to be involved, and continuously valued what I had to say. It was as if she could read my psychological need for acknowledgement through involvement. Because of this, she and I could be mutually supportive. I helped her on a number of occasions, and even though I was young she acted on my recommendations. In my turn, I took her seriously and applied her wisdom and experience to my own circumstances. In this way she was a teacher for me – she strengthened my ability to step into new situations with a deeper sense of self and a willingness to engage with others to discover their strengths, knowledge and wisdom. Through her I developed a sense of belonging to a community and sought to find practical means to express her legacy through living and articulating The Golden Path.

Many would have written me off at the age I was when I met Hilda. The gift that she gave me was to know that the world was rich with opportunity and that it was never too late to begin again.

Note: The Golden Path is an aspiration. As parents we will do our best and need to welcome our own feelings about ourselves on those occasions when we feel we are less than we may wish to be. ●

The Golden Path<sup>SM</sup> is the intellectual property of Consulting People Ltd.(CPL). Anyone wishing to use The Golden Path in a commercial context needs written permission from CPL before such use

**Gill Avery** and **Mike Vernon** co-founded Consulting People Ltd., and Gill is also co-founder of Consulting Women. Through years of involvement in adult learning and development, and parenting their own family, they believe that the foundation for an adult is laid down in childhood. They have therefore developed navigation and engagement tools that they use with their clients, their 'children' and themselves.