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21st Century Teens Need 21st Century Parents

By Jean Follmer



Annie Fox Photo provided

Parents throughout the 20th century held numerous goals and concerns for their children. Some of them included establishing monetary self-reliance, finding a good job, having respect for elders and authority figures, acting responsibly and not having sex before marriage. This list is a sampling of responses offered by parents of teenagers during a recent presentation at Miramonte High School.

"21st Century Teens Need 21st Century Parents" was presented by Annie Fox, M. Ed., and was co-sponsored by the Miramonte Parents Club and the Acalanes Union High School District. Annie was sought out by Miramonte Parent Education Coordinators Sherri Williams and Carol Lettko. They had both heard Fox speak on prior occasions. "I heard her several years ago and she just really connects with parents and helps them connect with their kids," said Lettko. Fox led the audience through an evening of learning, questions, and introspection.

Fox asked the audience how they thought parenting concerns have changed in the 21st century. In addition to 20th century issues, the rapid advancement of technology was a major concern. Technology-related answers included "exposure to inappropriate media content," "TV shows that are disrespectful and mean-spirited," the fact that "texting lacks a personal relation" and on-line social networking sites like MySpace. The parents felt these stimuli have resulted in a general disrespect for parents and authority.

Fox asked the audience if they've ever been at a meal with their teenager and the teen was either talking on the phone or texting. Nearly every hand went up. One parent mentioned her son curses at her and another talked of her son's friend who she witnessed sending twenty text messages in the span of an hour. "What has given teens the license to do this? Are your expectations clear in your kids' minds?" asked Fox.

"I think it's easy to say it's a technology gap. It's a parenting issue. If it's family time that should mean something," said Fox. Many of today's parents have not communicated clear expectations to their children. Even when expectations are communicated, they're not consistently enforced. Fox offered the idea of leaning on a wall that sometimes supports you and other times lets you fall. In the case of the mom and the son's text-messaging friend, that mom removed the texting service from her son's phone and now asks visiting teens to leave their phones on the entrance table during their visit.

Today's teens are living in a fast-paced world that is filled with academic and parental pressures and they are stressed-out. They have difficulty managing that stress so it plays out in ways that are sometimes unacceptable. For many teens, "there is a sense of urgency these days," said Fox.

Fox maintains a website that enables teens and parents to e-mail her questions about virtually anything. Before the presentation, Fox received an e-mail at "Hey Terra!" from a teenage girl saying she really likes a boy and thinks the boy likes her too and what should she do? Fox replied that she shouldn't feel like she has to do anything, to let things evolve naturally and discover if they have shared interests, compatible personalities and comparable values.

She also receives e-mails from teens asking advice about purely online relationships. Fox said the teens in those relationships have trouble distinguishing online relationships from personal ones that may involve actually dating. They don't have the ability to reason through it because they "don't have full faculty of their brains until they're in their mid-20's," said Fox. These problems lead to more stress and further inability to manage it.

"We tried to become our kids' friends and we may be paying the price for it. Kids are unhappy when they don't know where the boundaries are. We have to take a leadership role in our families," said Fox. It's normal for teens to attempt to distance themselves from their parents and it's not personal. "The fundamental task of adolescence is to move from the home to the school and peer group," said Fox.

However, "there has been a blurring of the parent/child line" and kids often view parents as equals or peers. "Teenagers don't enjoy feeling out of control. It embarrasses them. If you model for your kids that you know how to calm down, think and problem solve, you're showing them how to do it," said Fox. She led the audience in a breathing relaxation exercise and the resulting calm and silence in the room was deafening.

"You are your child's teacher. What are your parenting objectives for them? You have a chance to give them what they need to pass your exit exam (when they leave home)," said Fox. Fox suggested calling a family meeting to communicate those objectives and lay the ground rules. She said each family member should be given uninterrupted time to respectfully voice their likes, their dislikes and their desire for change within the family unit. She stressed the need to always be consistent and encouraged the idea of having regular family meetings.

Annie Fox is an author, educational consultant and former teacher. She also creates, designs, consults and scripts CD-ROM based educational/entertainment products for kids. She has recently published her newest book titled "Middle School Confidential" and has been invited to speak at the National Middle School Conference in Denver next month. "Middle School Confidential: Be Confident in Who You Are" is the first in a series of books for middle-school aged children. Other teen books include "Too Stressed to Think: a Teen Guide to Staying Sane When Life Makes You Crazy" and "The Teen Survival Guide to Dating and Relating". To e-mail Annie Fox or find her presentation schedule, go to www.anniefox.com.

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