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## Family Focus

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



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Of course, Tyler didn't want to cooperate and talk with his parents since this system was working well for him. And he was resentful that they kept nagging him. I encouraged his parents to let him know that they wanted to get along better and to find out what he thought would help. The appeal for Tyler was that suddenly his opinion and preferences mattered.

With Tyler's eventual participation, the family worked out ways to avoid ongoing conflict. Tyler wanted more uninterrupted time on his iPad to play Roblox, and they designated two times per week that this could happen. Tyler acknowledged that he needed to be ready when it was time to leave the house and stop causing everyone to be late. He asked that his mom let him know the schedule for the day each morning so he would have advance notice. Even though he had piano lessons on a certain day at a certain time each week, he said he needed a reminder.

The family agreed to keep meeting from time to time to allow for Tyler's input in a calm, conflict-free setting. He seemed to enjoy being treated in a more adult way and feeling like he had more control at this stage in his life.

2) Allison and her husband, Chris, had an ongoing problem with Allison's mother, Monica, who was divorced and lived close by. The couple had three young children and welcomed babysitting help from Monica from time to time. They wanted to spend time with her as well, but Monica's constant complaining and self-involved conversations were hard for them to tolerate. Although Monica provided help babysitting, they sometimes felt like they had a fourth child.

Since they didn't want to hurt her feelings or alienate Monica, they kept quiet and figured they needed to just accept the way she was. However, they had difficulty tolerating her behavior and therefore were reluctant to see her very often. This became a vicious cycle since Monica then felt excluded and complained more, and Allison felt guilty.

Allison and Chris knew that it would be helpful to communicate with Monica, but they were unsure how to do this effectively. We set up an initial session for just Allison and Monica, since it might be too overwhelming for Monica if Chris participated as well. Allison knew that she needed to keep her message to her mother as positive and caring as possible so the conversation wouldn't degenerate.

Allison spent time letting her mom know how much she appreciated her help and support. She said she loved her and wanted to spend more time with her. Then she said how it was hard for her to hear about her mother's dissatisfactions and not be able to do much about them. And she also felt that she couldn't listen

We're encouraged to have yearly physical exams with our physicians, and of course we're also advised to check out any physical symptoms we may be experiencing. In addition, many people are seeing the importance of psychotherapy to help them with emotional concerns and well-being.

A concept that is sometimes overlooked is the idea of periodically checking in with our family members to get feedback. There are various times when this pro-active approach can be very helpful. Here are some examples:

1) Tyler, age 10, had become increasingly defiant when his parents tried to regulate his screen time. He also didn't comply when it was time to get in the car to go to a sports practice or appointment. In other words, he was not being cooperative with his parents. Tyler had no problem in school listening well to his teacher, so his parents knew that his behavior was more willful than unintentional.

Tyler's parents had tried both positive and negative reinforcement, encouragement, pleading, and expressing their frustration. They were willing to try an open-ended discussion with him, without blame or anger. The objective was to omit their own feelings and allow for Tyler to express his. Timing was important since it needed to be during a tranquil period when emotions weren't raging.

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well enough to her mom when she was pulled between her family, her part-time job, and other compelling pressures. Allison said she wanted to hear about her mom up to a point, but hoped Monica could find someone to talk to more regularly.

Although Monica didn't like hearing anything that sounded at all critical, she was able to accept Allison's message and tried to limit her complaints from then on. Monica realized she needed to find other people in her life to confide in, and she ultimately joined a volunteer group at her church that provided her with more companionship.

Candid conversations in a non-threatening manner are hard to do sometimes. It's not easy to be able to talk openly with someone close, but after the initial discomfort there are usually benefits for the relationship. It is especially helpful for children, teens and young adults to be encouraged to express themselves with their parents. All too often, they may misjudge their parents as not being able or willing to have an open mind. They may be afraid of hurting their feelings or provoking anger or disapproval. If they see that their parents are receptive to what they're thinking and feeling, it can make a world of difference. Relationships can thrive when we make the effort to check in with our loved ones.

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