

November 2010

Please *Do* Fight with Your Teen-agers

By Andrew Malekoff

Teen-agers enjoy a good “fight” with adults who do not feel a need to dominate and are willing to listen. As children progress from the “earthbound” quality of concrete thinking to the “intergalactic” quality of complex thinking, they become capable of formulating contrary-to-fact-hypotheses, of leaping with their minds here, there and everywhere. Herein lays the source of teen-agers’ growing ability and fervor for challenging others’ ideas, beliefs and values and for engaging in furious debate, often to the dismay of parents, teachers and other adults.

One day when my son Jamie was 14, he told me that he was thrown out of class. He had argued with his Spanish teacher about how she had graded a test. One of the questions had a visual component. The class was asked to write, in Spanish, a sentence describing what they had observed in a drawing that depicted two women who were simultaneously holding a gift-wrapped package. Jamie told me that his answer was, “Una mujer está recibiendo un regalo” (A woman is receiving a gift). When the test was returned his answer was marked wrong and points were deducted. The correct answer, the teacher said, was, “A woman is giving a gift.”

He argued that the drawing could be interpreted both ways, giving or receiving. The debate was heated. The teacher was flustered. Jamie pressed on, continuing to argue his point until he was silenced by the teacher

He told me that he then raised his hand. The teacher ignored him at first. Nevertheless, his long outstretched arm became an exclamation point, punctuating the space in the classroom.

“JAMIE WHAT IS IT?” she shouted. He responded, “I just like to hear the sound of my voice.” His enraged teacher then banished him.

British educator Janet Batsleer has spoken eloquently about the hostilities and complicities that young people have experienced in schools. She refers to “Those people who have ‘spoken out of turn,’ or who have not spoken ‘properly,’ or who have learned carefully exactly when to speak in order to please the teacher, or who have become afraid to speak for fear of being spoken about as a problem or in even more hostile ways.”

We should welcome debate from young people. Reasoned arguments gradually replace simple reliance on authoritative pronouncements by grown-ups.

As a child’s brain develops, opposites such as good and bad, or black and white, or yes and no, can be held in one’s mind simultaneously, enabling an individual to examine subtle shadings of disparate ideas and to tolerate the ambiguities that are generated by

thoughtful debate. This “quantum leap” in thinking enables one to consider many viewpoints at once, use inductive and deductive thinking to reason and test reality by challenging contradictions and inconsistencies.

Young adolescents find that they can begin to argue for argument’s sake—for the fun of it. When we engage with them in spirited debate we help them to cultivate critical thinking, which is essential in order for a young person to become an active citizen in community affairs; to learn when to stand up and speak out.

So, please *do* fight with the teen-agers in your life. Fight with them to help them to flex their cognitive muscles and fight with them for fun. If you can avoid becoming defensive or intimidated, you might be pleased to discover that from the same source of adolescent combativeness and intellectual intransigence spring the seeds of inspiration and idealism.