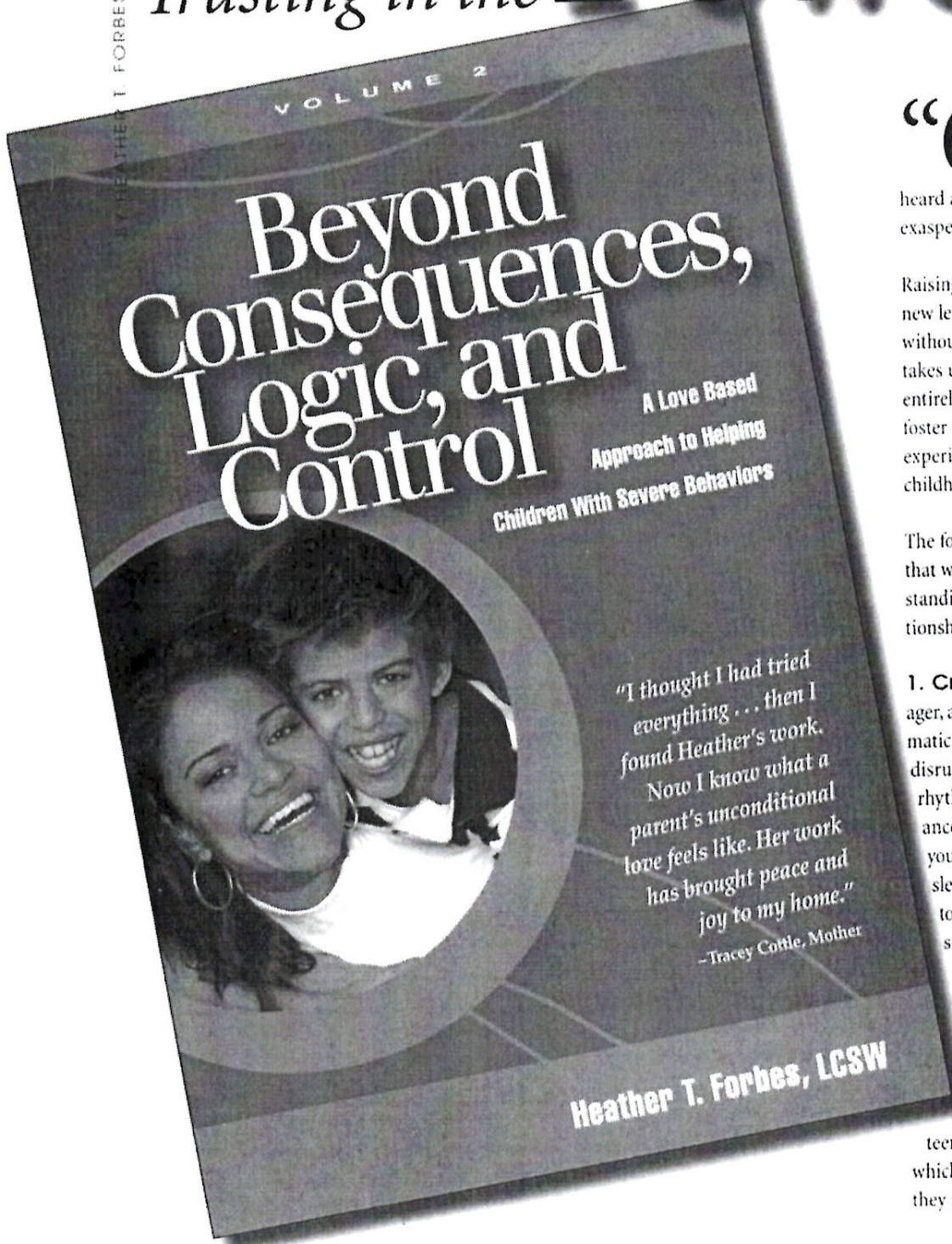


Teenagers,
Trauma and
Trusting in the

Power of



“Oh! Teenagers!” Have you ever found yourself saying this or overheard another parent saying this with an exasperated tone to her voice?

Raising teenagers takes parents to a whole new level. In order to rise to this occasion without exasperation and frustration, it takes understanding our teenagers at an entirely new level. This is especially true for foster parents raising teenagers who have experienced traumatic and unpredictable childhoods prior to being in their homes.

The following are four important factors that will give you the tools and the understanding you need to create a stronger relationship with your teen:

1. CIRCADIAN RHYTHMS. For any teenager, and especially for teenagers with traumatic histories, their circadian rhythms are disrupted. Circadian rhythms are the daily rhythms in the body that keep you balanced at a physiological level. They help you wake up and calm you down around sleep, they give you indicators as to when to eat, and they provide several other sensory experiences.

Circadian rhythms are naturally disrupted during the teenage years. For children with traumatic histories, these rhythms were most likely disrupted even before becoming a teenager due to environmental stressors, which means that during the teenage years, they are intensely disrupted.

Relationships

focus

BY HEATHER T. FORBES, LCSW

The result is a teen who sleeps at all hours of the day, eats in an unpredictable fashion, and simply operates in a disrupted physiological state. It is not a choice for your teen. It is simply how his or her body is operating at this developmental stage in life; it is his or her inherent biological rhythm.

So the next time your teen has a hard time waking up at 5 or 6 a.m., realize that his or her biological clock is telling him or her to sleep until noon. Having this understanding will give you more patience and allow you to support him or her more as he or she struggles through the requirements of life.

2. INFLUENCE VERSUS CONTROL. A teen operates from two opposite ends of the spectrum — he or she is both a regressed child and an emerging adult. One minute he or she is capable of having a 2-year-old tantrum and the next minute he or she can have the insight of a full grown adult. As parents, we interpret this as a child who is out of balance and that scares us. Our blueprints from our history and from other parenting resources have told us that this is a child who needs to be controlled and told what to do.

Yet, we all know what happens when we try to control a teenager. Explosions! And the intensity of such explosions is magnified when we are parenting a teenager who has a history of abandonment, abuse or neglect. Many children in foster care are literally living in survival mode and it can become a life or death struggle for them to keep one more person from controlling their lives.



Listening to a teenager begins by having more of a monologue where the teen talks and the parent sits and listens. Teens are trying to figure out who they are and they cannot do that if the parent is telling them who they are, how to behave, and what to do.

What we have failed to realize in the past is that we have much more “control” when we work toward influencing our teens.

Influence comes through developing a safe and loving relationship. It takes learning to listen first to your teen, learning to be present with him or her, and giving him or her the emotional space for complete expression.

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The reality is that your teen, due to his or her painful past, has already decided to run his or her own life because no one has been trustworthy. In order to help him or her change this strategy, it will take you listening first, and I mean really listening and developing a relationship with him or her.

Your teen is not going to want to listen to you until he or she feels like he or she has been listened to first. It is then that he or she will have more openness to listening to your advice and parental directives. This requires an endless supply of patience. It takes trusting that the relationship you are able to develop will be far more powerful than any authoritative control you try to implement.

3. FIGHT OR FLIGHT MODE. Stressed out teens, living beyond their window of stress tolerance, will either fight by becoming aggressive and threatening or flee by run-

ning away. This is typical behavior of any one of us when we feel helpless, scared, trapped or overwhelmed. The issue is that many teens feeling this way have poorly developed internal control mechanisms and lack the ability to self-regulate. Thus, the level of the intensity of these behaviors is magnified and can be scary for the adults charged with their care.

With any child, the road to healing and change comes through understanding the core issue behind the behavior. Anger and aggression is an expression of a feeling or

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emotion. Essentially, an angry child is a scared child. He or she is a child living in a deep state of fear. Anger is the only safe way he or she has learned to express this fear. Reacting to such behavior as a parent through controlling and fear-based measures only creates more of the same for the child.

A child who runs away is a child who goes in the opposite direction. He or she goes into flight mode. This is a child who feels like he or she cannot win, no matter how hard he or she tries, so he or she just leaves. He or she feels he or she is not good enough or lovable. He or she may also be running away from pain, essentially running away from him or herself. This is typically a child who is not even comfortable in his or her own skin.

What parents typically do when the child

returns or when he or she is reunited with the parent is to say, "What were you thinking? It isn't safe for you to run away like that!" and more. These types of statements only create more rejection and more fear for the teen. What he or she needs in this moment is safety, love and acceptance. What if, at that moment, we put aside our own fear, and celebrate our child's return, saying, "I'm so glad you're home. I missed you?"

4. ABANDONMENT. As I was writing this article, my son was sitting with me so I asked him what advice he would give par-

ents about their teens (my son was adopted as a toddler and is now 15 years old). He talked about abandonment, how incredibly painful it is for children, and how it will always be the biggest piece in his history and in the history of other children who have experienced a break in their relationship with their biological parents.

In his words, "Abandonment is the worst thing that can happen to you, ever! Even going to jail is better than being abandoned because at least you fit in there and you're getting attention. Anything is better than being abandoned."

This desire for life-long connection is much more than just a desire or a want. It is literally a biological need within us. Science is showing that we are hard-wired as a species to live in community and to be in relationships. Relationships ensure our survival. We

literally die or go insane if we are not connected to one another.

If your child has experienced abandonment, his or her need for connection is magnified more than with most teens. Yet at the same time, he or she is going to be scared of this connection. It is a difficult place to live: needing connection, yet being terrified of it at the same time. What your child needs most from you is a relationship with you. Your relationship with him or her needs to be the number one priority in all interactions with him or her, which means setting the negative behaviors aside for the moment and giving your child unconditional love in times of heightened stress and behavioral outbursts.

It takes parenting beyond the traditional model of giving consequences, going beyond lecturing on the logics of the choices he or she needs to make, and setting aside a need to control your teen. Parenting teens, especially teens with trauma histories, takes being willing to shift out of your own perspective and being willing to go into a deeper place of understanding in order to see what is driving your child's actions and attitudes.

Your teen does need you, despite the resistance or negativity he or she may outwardly show and give you. Look beyond his or her behaviors and there you will find a child yearning for love and acceptance from you. When you can meet him or her in that place, there you will find the connection, peace and healing you have been seeking all along. ❁

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