

Attachment Parenting

“Can You Hear Me Now?”

Summary Notes on Working More Effectively with Millennial Parents from Bob Ditter¹

Understand Your Parents’ Reality

The world today is a very different place from what it was even 5 years ago. Over 75% of children in the United States ages 11-18 have a cell phone—one given them by anxious parents who are now used to “checking in” with their children several times a day. Experts think that percentage will creep up to maybe 80% by the end of 2008.

What’s driving this parental anxiety? Try this list on for size: child abductions; inappropriate sexual contact between revered, venerable teachers/coaches and children; world terrorism; uncertainty about the economic future—losing jobs overseas; the rising price of gas and oil; spiraling health care costs; West Nile virus; Lyme disease; rabies; the Asian Flu; London subway bombings; train bombings in Madrid; shootings in schools; and on and on. Parents are trying to prepare and inoculate their children for a highly uncertain future. Is it any wonder they’re edgy?!

Children themselves don’t feel safe. They not only sense their parents’ anxiety, but they hear the media reports and many talk about recurring bomb scares with “lock down” drills at their schools. Children often say they are happy to check in (call or text) Mom or Dad several times a day. Even at college the norm is for many freshmen and sophomores to speak with parents once a day—a substantial change from years past.

Children and their parents also share many things: music; clothes; interests. Parents have actually done a great job of spending more time with their children, though the boundaries are more blurred. Meaning parents and kids often relate to one another as peers, and not as parent and child. When children go to camp, they often have an easier time separating from their parents than the parents have separating from them. We may joke about it, but it does sound like parents, used to so much contact and involvement with their children, go through a kind of withdrawal!

Avoid Getting Caught in the Arguments

Parents who are anxious and who experience some loss around their child being away at camp may feel helpless to fend or advocate for their children when they are not physically in their company. Especially since they are so used to having a high level of day-to-day contact with their children, that anxiety or helplessness may get expressed as anger or a challenge or a demand to you, the camp professional, on the phone or in an e-mail. Don’t be fooled by the attack and step into what I call this “trap.” If you take the attack or demand personally (easy to do!), you will not be as effective as if you see it for what it is: an expression of the parent’s anxiety, helplessness or sense of loss. Try to get to the concern behind the challenge and discover what it is that is driving it. In other

¹ From the upcoming book by Bob Ditter, *Can You Hear Me Now? Better Parent Relationships for Better Camping*, due to be released in the fall, 2007.

words, honor the parent's concerns and acknowledge their feelings, then get more information.

Parents Tend to 'Lead with their Solution'

What this means is that anxious parents, accustomed as they are to this daily contact with their children, *feel it is their job to argue and fend for their children*. Anything short of that is, well, simply not being a good parent! Once again, don't get fooled! Look for the concern behind the challenge or demand and avoid becoming defensive. Or as I say to counselors, don't pick up that rope! (Meaning, don't take the bait and get into an argument about the merits of what a parent is demanding.) Go instead for the feeling or concern *behind* the demand.

Come Up for A. I. R.

Coming up for AIR is what I suggest when the feeling becomes intense. It is a way to try to retain your composure and move a parent into a more reflective, meaningful discussion about what their concern is for their child. Here's what it stands for:

A stands for “**acknowledge the feeling behind the concern or demand.**”

I stands for “**inquire.**” Ask thoughtful questions. Get to the heart of the matter by being thoughtful about what a person is saying and asking probing questions. Take an interested posture.

R stands for “**respond.**” Once you have a sense of what is truly bothering a parents, fashion your response. If you need to check something out first, your response will be that you will look into things and therefore be better able to respond *at some specified time in the future*.

I recommend using this technique when the emotion gets intense. Coming up for “AIR” is a way to take parents where they are coming from and take the heat or intensity out of the situation. It may take time and it may not work—some parents are intent on picking a fight at all costs! But it is a good first attempt at trying to respond in a way that is not inflammatory, but invites reflection.

Other Useful Phrases

A good line to remember: “If what you're saying is true—and I have no reason to doubt you; I just haven't had a chance to look into it—then I am glad you told me, because that's not what we stand for here. Those are not our values. It's not what we teach here. Let me check into it and I'll get back to you.”

- Even when parents are upset or angry, tell them that you are glad that they called or came to speak with you.
- Tell parents that you can't do anything about a problem you don't know about.
- Tell them many parents might not come and talk to you, and you are glad they did!

What about when a parent tells you something their child has told them (“my counselor’s been mean to me”) that you discover is not true? Once you thoroughly check into the situation, and you may have to speak with several different people about this, and you talk to the parent about what you think *did* happen, what do you do if the parent responds by saying, “Are you telling me my child’s a liar?!” You answer, “Of course not! Children *always* tell their version of things to parents. Usually they are trying to tell us something. We just need to figure out what that might be. Sometimes it’s a child’s way of telling us they are a little anxious about fitting in or making the adjustment to camp. Do *you* have any ideas, Mr. or Mrs. Camp Parent?”

Other Pointers that Help in Approaching Parents

Here are some other pointers that will help you in working more successfully with parents:

- 1) Avoid making parents wrong. Once you do, they can’t hear the important things you have to say.
- 2) Demonstrate that you know *specific, positive* things about their child. Not only does this enhance your credibility with each parent (“oh, you really *do* know my child!”), it signals that you see their child in a friendly, non-critical way. What can parents be proud of? What can you enjoy about their child? Parents love it when other people *enjoy* their children.
- 3) Be a resource. Have some websites, books or articles in your repertoire that you can offer parents *if they moment seems right or they seem open to suggestions*. Here are a few of mine:

Generation Me, Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D., 2006, Free Press (Simon and Schuster, Inc.)

The Blessing of a Skinned Knee, Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children, Wendy Mogel, Ph.D., 2001, Penguin/Compass Books.

1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12, Thomas Phelan, Child Management Inc., 2003.

Delivered from Distraction, Getting the Most Out of Life with Attention Deficit Disorder, Edward Hallowell, MD, and John Ratey, MD, Ballantine Books, 2005.

Best Friends, Worst Enemies, Understanding the Social Lives of Children, Michael Thompson and Catherine O’Neill Grace, Ballantine Books, 2001.

- 4) Share your concern as exactly that: a concern, not a judgment.
- 5) Encourage the child to articulate their own concerns. (Fear of disappointing a parent, being a burden, having a “blemish.”)
- 6) Focus on the desirability of developing coping skills: helping children develop what we call *resilience*—learning to solve ones own problems, persevere, recover from a set back, and have the confidence about being able to do so!