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THE ADOLESCENCE EFFECT

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Independent Thinking Associate Andrew 'Bernie' Bernard is on a mission to help schools and families understand and combat toxic masculinity.

Over the last few years he has spoken to thousands of young people across the UK about this important issue.

What's more, after tragically losing his sister at the hands of her controlling and abusive partner – now serving a life sentence for her murder – it's a very personal mission.

With all the buzz around the shocking Netflix series Adolescence, we thought we'd ask Bernie for his advice for parents around helping children and young people avoid the sorts of pressures depicted in the drama.

Here he shares his *Ten Tips for Parents* to help them help their children stay safe.

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1. HAVE THE TALK.

When it comes to finding out about sex and relationships, research found that parents accounted for less than ten per cent of that understanding. Used twice as much was online pornography and three times as much was social media.

If you're not talking to them about sex and intimate relationships, someone else will be.

For the sake of everyone's safety, have the talk.

2. UNDERSTAND AND DISCUSS CONSENT WITH YOUR CHILDREN. REGULARLY.

Yes, it's embarrassing I know. I'm a parent too. It's the sort of thing we wish someone else would do but the research shows that's not the case.

For example, nearly a quarter of young people claim they didn't have any education on the topic of sexual harassment.

What's more, the researchers found that a similar number disagreed with the statement 'You always need consent to have sex with someone'.

That same research also found that while only four per cent of young people agreed that it was acceptable to physically hurt someone in a relationship as long as you said 'sorry' afterwards, that figure was nearly five times higher for those who consumed 'Andrew Tate' style content.

Talking about consent – not just sexual consent but also more broadly about boundaries and saying 'no' - will help keep your child and other people's children safe.

3. KNOW THE SIGNS OF ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND MAKE SURE YOUR CHILDREN DO TOO.

Driven by online influencers and pornography, young people may find themselves in a relationship with someone using coercive control or controlling behaviours to manipulate them.

Often starting small and dressed up as 'care' or 'keeping you safe', these behaviours can become overbearing and controlling.

Understanding the tell-tale signs will help combat this.

There is a great book called *When Love Bites* on this topic.

The author, psychotherapist Cathy Press, describes the following types of behaviour to watch out for:

- The Partner – ideal behaviours
- The Controller – how controllers work on others
- The Charmer – using charm to achieve their goals
- The Bully – when charm doesn't work, threats might
- The Mindmixer – gaslighting and mind games
- The Taker – sexual exploitation
- The Keeper – isolation as a tool of control

By talking honestly about such behaviours, we can all be watchful and alert for unhealthy relationship dynamics.

4. HELP YOUR CHILDREN UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRIVACY AND SECRECY.

Research released by The Youth Endowment Fund in December 2024, found that around 13% of children aged 13 to 17 in romantic or intimate relationships in the UK were likely to experience some form of control, abuse or violence.

The most common controlling behaviours the victims experienced not only included being made to feel scared to break up or even disagree with the partner, physical or sexual violence and undue pressure or force to engage in sexual activity but also feeling like you are being watched or monitored, being constantly messaged and having their messages examined to see who they were talking to.

It's clear that the technology we use on a daily basis is also being used by controlling people to track and 'investigate' their partners.

While there are apps that offer such 'services', even seemingly benign ones like Find My Friends and Snap Maps can be used to track, monitor and otherwise control young people under the guise of 'care'.

As a parent, you may well have them on one location system or another for all the right reasons. Ask who else they think may be able to locate them at any given time and, importantly, why?

And ask who they are able to track in return and how that person feels about it. While you're there, ask if they ever feel like they should or shouldn't be somewhere and who demands it?

And explore how they really feel about always being visible to everyone? Do they ever feel like they want to 'switch off' and go invisible for a while?

4. HELP YOUR CHILDREN UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRIVACY AND SECRECY CONT...

And if so, what's stopping them?

Help them understand that their entitlement to privacy does not mean they are keeping secrets.

As with all conversations with teens, they need time to breathe so such conversations are often best carried out over a milkshake or on a dog walk rather than with elbows on the kitchen table.

5. LEARN THE LINGO.

Throughout time, parents have had trouble deciphering the language of their offspring.

No cap, eh?!

With most of it, we can put it down to us adults being too 'cheugy' to keep up with how 'lit' they are.

But when it comes to the language of misogyny and unhealthy relationships, we need to keep our ears open for some tell-tale language.

For example, you may notice young men and boys influenced by a certain brand of shouty, shirtless male podcasters using the following on an increasingly frequent basis:

5. LEARN THE LINGO CONT...

- Calling women 'girls'
- Calling women 'females'
- Using phrases like 'Feminism's gone too far' or 'Feminists are man haters'
- Talking about 'false accusations that ruin men's lives' when sexual harassment and/or assault allegations emerge
- Referring to 'fatherless behaviour' or people 'raised by a single mother'
- Talking about 'parental alienation'
- Claiming 'men are oppressed now'
- Talking about how 'traditional man is a provider'
- Using words like 'simp' or 'cuck' or 'Low-T' (where 'T' is testosterone) to describe men and boys who show the slightest empathy and kindness to women and women's issues.
- Following the US elections in 2024, you may have heard the slogan 'Your body; my choice' as women's rights were again under threat with Trump's re-election. (Don't get me started on the role of misogyny and [white] male supremacy underpinning the whole MAGA thing)

Knowing how to recognise the language of what has been dubbed the 'manosphere' helps you listen out for who may be influencing your child.

And how.

More on that below.

6. TALK ABOUT BODY IMAGE.

In a recent survey of 1,146 young people aged between 12 and 30, only 15% had a positive body-image.

What's more, nearly four in every ten young people reported a negative image.

The research suggested that the main factors at play were the impact of social media and way young people were bombarded with fake or heavily edited photos which claimed to represent 'reality'.

A 'reality' that was clearly unattainable.

Discussing these unrealistic and manipulated expectations will help, along with exploring how the marketing of products such as cosmetics – often carried out by highly paid influencers – necessitates us finding fault with our own bodies.

Using genuine sports people such as Olympians and Paralympian's is a great way of helping to develop a better understanding of how amazing the 'imperfect' human body really is.

7. DISCUSS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG).

The 'Manosphere' is built on misogyny.

It puts forwards simple solutions to complex issues, especially the idea that feminism is the root cause of many of the problems in the world.

It promotes the notion that men are entitled to whatever they want – in the world of work and also in their relationships with women.

This manifests itself in a number of ways, including the controlling and abusive behaviours we touched on above and also in a shocking increase in sexual assaults and the harassment of women in public places.

For example, a British Transport Police survey found a 20% increase in assaults against women and girls have taken place in 2023/4. You can find a BBC report about that here.

Talking of which, the way such a state of affairs are represented in the media is worth unpicking with your children too.

For example, this report by the BBC in Dec 2024 is about a scheme in Humberside where school-age girls have undertaken self-defence classes. Yet it fails to mention that schemes to help young men to be less violent and abusive might be a better solution!

Discussing violence against women and girls is a good starting point.

Ask them if they think there's enough awareness of harassment and abuse in public places.

Ask them whether they think there's enough focus on why and how the perpetrators should change their behaviours.

7. DISCUSS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG) CONT...

Ask them whether they think they could do anything themselves to become more aware of their behaviours and those of their friends.

And then keep the conversation going.

8. DON'T PLAY THE BLAME GAME.

The algorithms that drive content towards us online are very clever things.

They are also pernicious.

For example, once the algorithm knows you are a young female, cue the steady stream of content about weight loss, music, make-up and exercise.

Once it knows you are a young male, that's it prompt to send content that is harmful, violent, misogynistic, pornographic or all of it combined.

This [BBC Panorama report](#) from 2024 explains how certain sorts of content are sent directly to young males, content that, in the words of one young man interviewed, 'stains your brain'.

All of which means that, to have those important conversation about the sorts of content your children are watching online, it is important to be open, honest and non-judgmental.

Shame will shut down those vital conversations immediately.

And look at using Wi-Fi controls and filters too for the whole household.

9. SCREEN ADDICTION – LEAD THE WAY.

This is a big one.

We, as adults, need to lead by example.

We need to put some guidelines and boundaries into our internet and device use.

The Wi-Fi- filters mentioned above can help regulate how often and when the household can get online.

There are also apps like Forest, for helping children focus.

This is not only great during exam revision season, it also allows the child to wean themselves off their constant screen use and reclaim their ability to focus on something for more than a few minutes at a time.

It's free and enables children to 'grow a tree' in time-bound sessions which they can set and control. In this way, they build a forest and can compete against friends to build their forests together.

10. BEEN THERE; DONE THAT.

We've all been teens once – moody, petulant, stubborn, fixated on something or someone.

It's never an easy time and, in our new digital age, there is extra pressure on children from social media and a new set of 'rules' that have emerged around friendships, relationships and expectations.

In the same way there can be work pressures on us to be 'always on', our children are expected to be online non-stop.

10. BEEN THERE; DONE THAT CONT...

Not because they can be but because they feel they should be.

The antidote (for us as well as them)?

The good-old boring stuff that our parents hopefully did for us – boundaries and routines.

Eat together. At least some of the time. Sit at the table to eat and have a 'no-phones' policy. Not them. Not you. No exceptions. Instead, talk to each other.

A teen grunting at you is still better than one on his or her phone non stop.

Ask what the best bits of the day were?

Ask them what questions they asked at school today?

Ask about what's going on for everyone.

Thirty minutes sharing food and table service duties keeps the heart in a family.

After all, research from Harvard found that young people who help around the house become happier, more purposeful adults)

And charge your phones downstairs – EVERYONE.

You'll get arguments about 'needing the phone for an alarm' so buy a cheap alarm clock.

Charging downstairs is safer, reduces screen time, allows the brain to calm at the end of the day and, in this way, encourages better sleep.

10. BEEN THERE; DONE THAT CONT...

Remember games consoles are online devices too so restrict their use in the same manner.

Go old school and read a book or watch TV. Together.

Boundaries are part of the caring responsibilities we have as parents for our children. They act as protection, guidance and balance.

You'll get kick back to begin with, but pushing the boundaries is what young people do.

And enforcing them is what good parents do.

Weather the storm – it will be worth it in the long term for you and for the safety and health of your children and wider society as they mature.

It can be a scary world these days for old and young alike.

Keep vigilant, keep learning and keep talking and we will be going a long way to keeping our children safe.

The following list of books may be helpful for you and /or your teens:

Men Who Hate Women by Laura Bates (written in 2020 this was the 'canary in the coal mine' about 'manosphere misogyny');

For The Love Of Men by Liz Plank;

The Descent Of Man by Grayson Perry;

Invisible Women by Caroline Criado Perez.

Avoidance, Drugs, Heartache and Dogs by Jordan Stephens.

Women Don't Owe You Pretty by Florence Given.

And watch out for my new book, *Boys to Men*, coming soon from the Independent Thinking Press.

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