

The Blessing of a B Minus

Parenting Group Discussion Guide

I've written this guide to provide parents of teenagers with a framework for discussing the topics of *The Blessing of a B Minus* in a group setting. Teachers and school administrators can also use the guide to form a group of their own. Talking about your concerns and getting the perspective of peers can be cathartic, reassuring, and eye-opening. Yet parents of teens are less likely to participate in parent education programs or discussion groups than parents of young children.

I witnessed this reluctance firsthand when I decided to hold my first classes for parents of teens a few years ago. I expected the classes would be similar to the ones I'd held for parents of children in elementary school, when the participants would arrive at my office like butterflies, wearing happy colors and alighting gracefully in their chairs. They talked a lot, commiserated, and smiled. We had fun. But when I walked into my first class for parents of teens, it felt as though the lighting had changed in the room. The parents wore darker clothes and darker expressions. They raised their hands to speak, and even when I called on them they didn't speak much. A few of them admitted reasons for their reticence: they were afraid of betraying their teen's privacy or worried the others would judge them for having poor parenting skills. After a few sessions, however, the parents discovered how much they had in common, even though their problems looked different on the surface. Once the ice was broken these parents were movingly honest and very funny. The payoff for overcoming the initial inhibition was a sense of proportion, a deeper understanding of the normal pain of raising adolescents, a feeling of hope, and an appreciation of the power of fellowship.

Despite reservations you might feel about sharing your parenting worries, I encourage you to give a parenting group a try. Here are a few guidelines I've developed over the years to create strong groups and get the discussion flowing.

Nuts and Bolts

Group size is an important element. A group that is too small can devolve into a chat session; one that's too large will lack intimacy. Aim to have ten to twelve members in your group. (If you have a professional leader, such as an adolescent development specialist, counselor, or psychologist, the group can be larger, with up to twenty members.)

When and where should your group meet? The answers depend on the group's composition. Parents working outside of home will be available on weekday evenings; those who have more flexible schedules may prefer to meet in the morning shortly after school drop-off. Weekend meetings are often harder to schedule because they conflict with teens' activities and parental driving obligations. An exception to this rule occurs when parents whose children attend Sunday school together form a group of their own. If the school or your synagogue or church can offer you a meeting room, your group can conveniently assemble while the children are in class.

Most book discussion groups are held at members' homes. The advantage of rotating among member's residences is distribution of responsibility for hosting and traveling, the advantage of meeting at the same place each time is ease of navigation and familiarity.

I suggest scheduling an hour and a half for each meeting if you can start promptly, two hours if you want to allow for a brief schmoozing period at the beginning. Consider holding meetings weekly for a predetermined period: six to eight weeks is a typical duration. Of course, you can alter the schedule or extend the group as the members wish.

Groups can also meet in cyberspace via videoconferencing sessions and online discussions. But because of the technological requirements and the challenges of maintaining privacy, I recommend virtual meetings only when in-person groups are not possible.

How to Find Participants

As I mentioned, parents of teens are notoriously reluctant to discuss their problems. At one high school, the school counselor, desperate to boost enrollment in her parent education programs, changed the title of her discussion group from “Understanding Teen Social and Emotional Development” to “A Workshop on How to Get Your Child into College: The Impact of Teen Social and Emotional Development.” Since few parents got as far as the subtitle, the room was packed. I doubt you’ll need to employ trickery to find group members, but unless you already know several parents who want to start a discussion group, you’ll need persistence as well as a light touch. Try submitting an announcement to your school, church, synagogue or community center newsletter, or message board, or post it on a social networking site. You can write something like, “Escape from your teenagers! Meet new people with similar problems, make new friends; sharing of personal stuff is encouraged but not required...if you are a perfect parent with perfect child, you are not invited.” Or pass a similar email message announcing your group to anyone who has regular contact with parents of teens. This includes school administrators, coaches, private music teachers, tutors, the librarian, the head of the parents’ association, or the mom in your neighborhood who knows everyone. Ask these people to forward the message to possible group members. Another option is to look for members on Goodreads.com, a book lovers’ website that offers opportunities for its three million members to form book discussion groups.

Leadership

Almost everyone knows of a book club in which books are never discussed. If you want your parenting group to have some meat on its bones, consider hiring or appointing someone to lead it. A leader helps provide some structure; structure allows the members more confidence; and confidence leads to a deeper conversation.

If your group elects a moderator from one of its ranks, the members should grant her the authority to say things like, “We’ve gotten off track,” or “Let’s hear from someone else now,” or “That’s a great point. We’ll talk about it more in a few weeks.” A professional leader can perform these services and also offer expertise in adolescence. You can ask a counselor, social worker, or member of the clergy to take on the role. Make sure the leader has experience with teenagers. Although school administrators and teachers can make capable leaders, avoid using someone who works in a school attended by children of group members. (An exception is an exclusively school-based group led by a counselor from that school.) Otherwise the familiarity can make it difficult for parents of teens to be candid.

Ground Rules

A few good ground rules will keep the group members feeling comfortable and protected. Here are some possibilities for your group:

- If the group leader is not in charge of organizational details, appoint someone else to manage this task. This person will maintain contact information, send out meeting reminders, and handle other logistics as they arise. Members should contact this person if they are unable to attend a meeting.

- Meetings will be held at a regular time and won't be rescheduled to accommodate the needs of individual members. Group members will do their best to arrive on time and stay for the full meeting.
- Group members acknowledge the privacy concerns of both parents and their teenagers; they also acknowledge the honor of being trusted with information about others' families. What is said in the group will be kept confidential.
- No one is required to share personal information about themselves, their families, or their teens. The group agrees that members can opt to "pass" out of a discussion and remain quiet, without being badgered about this decision by other members.
- Members also agree to stay aware of the natural impulse to monopolize the discussion. They will refrain from excessive interruption and attempt to give equal airtime to everyone.
- Members will phrase comments about one another's parenting decisions in respectful, positive terms. They agree to do more listening than advising and to refrain from psychoanalyzing, haranguing, or offering predictions about the fate of other members' children.

Curriculum for a *Blessing of a B Minus* Parenting Group

Below is a curriculum for a parenting group that meets for eight sessions. Each session includes a reading assignment and discussion questions. Don't be alarmed by the number of questions; I've included more questions than a group can reasonably expect to discuss in a ninety-minute session. The leader or group members can pick and choose from the questions according to the group's interests. Questions should be forwarded to members in advance of each meeting, since some of them require personal reflection or a bit of research.

Session One

Reading assignment:

Chapter 1. The Hidden Blessings of Raising Teenagers

Chapter 2. The Blessing of Strange Fruit: Accepting the Unique Glory of Your Teen

Open the first session with introductions. Invite members to say their names and the gender, ages, and grades of their teens. If they wish, members can describe topics they hope the group will cover. Next go around the room and share brief general reactions to the assigned chapters. (*"What stood out? What did you relate to?"*) Then move on to the members' answers to the chosen questions. Remind members that they are entitled to say "pass" when their turn comes up. Expect the class to take a few sessions to hit its stride. Be patient and as tolerant as possible, both with yourself and the other members, as many of these subjects are delicate and/or sensitive.

1. Discuss the idea that adolescence can be compared to the Israelites' journey across the desert. In what areas are your teenagers still too green to enter the Promised Lands they long for?

2. How would you characterize your own teenage years? Do you wish to shield your child from what you went through, or would you like him or her to have some similar experiences?
3. How would you describe your child's adolescence so far? What are your fears about their journey? What are your hopes for the next few years?
4. What is your leadership style as a parent? Do you tend to micromanage and worry a lot; do you issue orders from the top and expect them to be followed; or are you more laid back? What are the benefits and disadvantages of each style? How can you cultivate the quality of 'compassionate detachment'?
5. Think of parents whose teenagers have grown into happy, productive, non-neurotic adults. How would you characterize their parenting style? Or interview one or two teachers or school administrators you admire. Ask them about the strategies they use to detach themselves from dramas while remaining respectful, effective leaders. Share these with the group.
6. What are your dreams for your child's future? Where do they differ from your child's own dreams?
7. Take an inventory of your child's innate gifts and inclinations. Have you expected your child to change in ways that may not be possible due to his natural temperament? Where can you reasonably ask your child to stretch?
8. When is it appropriate for a parent to insist that a child develop skills that will contribute to a well-rounded, successful adult life? What is your view about requiring teenagers to master a musical instrument, become fluent in a second language, play at

least one sport, or develop a specialized area of academic knowledge, even if the child resists?

9. Looking back at the past week and month, make your own appreciation list similar to the one on page 28. Try viewing your teen from the standpoint of a cultural anthropologist. What do you appreciate about your “strange fruit”?

Session Two

Reading assignment:

Chapter Three. The Blessing of a Bad Attitude: Living Graciously with the Chronically Rude

1. Are teens today truly less polite than teens of previous generations, or do elders always despair of the callowness of youth?
2. What manners did you learn at home that stood you in good stead in your adult life? Were any oppressive or unnecessary? What was neglected in your social education?
3. Fill in the blank: I wish to foster mutual respect and decorum in my home but consistently struggle with _____.
4. Make a list of standards for minimum politeness in your home. How does it differ from mine? From others in the group? Do you find that there is a general consensus, or does there seem to be a lack of community agreement about what constitutes good manners in adolescents?
5. Many of the parents I work with guiltily describe their pattern of interaction with their teens as “Nice, nice, nice...mean!” In other words, they accommodate their teens’ challenging behavior until they explode in fury. Does this describe your own pattern?

What would a more productive pattern look like? What can you do to shift your rhythm of emotional responses?

6. Is it possible that your child is *too* polite? Is she a people pleaser? Inhibited? Not as forthright with peers as you would like him to be?
7. Do you believe in double standards for parents and teens when it comes to salty language, keeping your word, and being on time?
8. Do you wake your teen each weekday morning? Do you mind starting your day this way? What are the potential disadvantages of this courtesy?
9. List some ways you put “money in the bank of goodwill” for your teen. Are they effective?

Session Three

Reading assignment:

Chapter Four. The Blessing of a B Minus: The Real Lessons of Homework, Chores, and Jobs

1. What are your own household chores? What is your attitude toward doing them?
2. Make a list of the tasks you'd like to add to your child's to-do list. (This list could include specific chores, or responsibility for keeping track of homework assignments, or getting a paid job.) Then list the obstacles that may prevent you from following through on this list. If you wish, share the two lists with the group and ask for suggestions for overcoming hurdles.

3. How much parental involvement in homework is appropriate? Is a hands-off approach ever best? How has your view changed from your child's earlier school years?
4. Do you agree that a teen should be allowed to have a messy bedroom, or do you feel that a disorderly space means a disorderly mind?
5. If your child lets stuff pile up in his room, is it ever appropriate to go in and sort through the notebooks, clothes, paper, and junk? What about discarding these things without your teen's permission? What are the costs and benefits?
6. In an economy where jobs are scarce, unpaid internships are becoming more and more popular as a way to gain work experience and build a resume. Yet in this chapter I compare such internships unfavorably to ordinary, unglamorous paid jobs. Do you find my view old-fashioned, impractical or sensible?
7. Does your teen have a job? What are the best opportunities for part-time work in your area?

Session Four

Reading Assignment:

Chapter Five. The Blessing of a Lost Sweater: Managing Your Teen's Materialism, Entitlement, and Carelessness

1. What was your favorite item of clothing, sports equipment, room decoration, gadget, tool, or other "toy" as a teenager?

2. When you were a teen, were there specific items you coveted but never received? Did you feel deprived? Did this feeling have a negative impact on you? Or was there an advantage in it?
3. Is your child too materialistic? How might the example you set reinforce this tendency?
4. Some teens like to look sharp, while others prefer worn out, sloppy, or dirty clothing. If your child is uninterested in what you consider proper attire and grooming what might he or she be trying to communicate with this style? What role do you wish to take in enforcing standards of dress?
5. Invite a member of the group to read the story of Lily and the rejected BMW aloud in class. What is your reaction to Lily's parents' response? How would you react if your child complained about a generous gift?
6. Think of an exchange in which your teenager was angry with you for not providing a particular item or performing a particular service. How did you react? If you wish you could have handled the situation differently, try role-playing it with another parent in the group.
7. Do you possess "healthy narcissism"? What are some ways you can demonstrate conviction about the importance of looking nice and caring for your needs?
8. Re-read the graduation dress story. Do you find yourself sympathizing with either Mom A or Mom B? Why?

Session Five

Reading Assignment:

Chapter Six. The Blessing of Problems to Solve: Letting Your Teen Learn from Bad Judgment and Stressful Situations

1. Where is your child too intolerant of suffering? Is it in math, sports, or dull tasks such as proofreading or memorization? Do you see your child as oversensitive to teasing from friends or criticism from adults?
2. And where is your child *too* tolerant and unable to stand up for himself when a legitimate problem arises?
3. Do you frequently rush in to save your child from unpleasant situations? Think of a specific instance. Are you glad you intervened or helped out, or do you regret your actions? If you wish to respond differently in the future, how can you remind yourself to stop and reflect before rushing in too quickly?
4. Teens have a right to make mistakes and learn from them—and so do parents. How do you feel when you realize you've made a parenting misstep? Are you modeling the self-acceptance you want your teenager to develop?
5. Page 102 describes the need to distinguish dramas from emergencies. Share ideas with the group about ways to tell the difference.
6. What were your experiences of good danger during adolescence? Did you travel without adult supervision? Spend time with people very different from your own family or community? Lie to your parents about your whereabouts to gain some freedom? How did these experiences prepare you to navigate life on your own?
7. Do you suffer from “mean world syndrome”? How can you cultivate a nonalarmist but realistic view of your environment?

8. Did you ever experience danger that left a lasting, upsetting impression? Did the experience teach you street smarts? Or did it wound you in some way? How do these experiences affect the way you raise your teenager?

Session Six

Reading Assignment:

Chapter Seven. The Blessing of Staying Up Late: Making Time for Rest and Fun

1. Did you take your children to religious services when they were young? If so, is your teenager enthusiastic about attending now? What are the best ways to handle a teen's reluctance to participate in religious activities?
2. Did you celebrate Shabbat or a day of rest when your child was smaller? Do you now? What are ways you can draw the spirit of Shabbat into your week?
3. Does your teen have enough time for sleep and relaxation?
4. How do you feel about stepping in when an overworked, overtired teenager insists that she "likes being busy" or that he "doesn't need to sleep"? Where do you draw the line between letting a teen learn the downside of overscheduling and protecting him from the pressure of our hypercompetitive culture?
5. What activities provided you with the most fun and flow as a teenager?
6. What is your teenager's preferred method of chilling out? Does it offend, frighten, or annoy you?
7. Many parents of teens say they feel left out and depleted. What pathways to flow have you tried? Have you expanded your social world? What is working? What isn't?

8. What's your policy about your teen entering your bedroom? Do you have a private space that is entirely your own?

Session Seven

Reading Assignment:

Chapter Eight. The Blessing of Breaking the Rules: Real Life as Ethics Lab

1. Re-read pages 136 through 139 about the "traps" parents fall into when their child breaks rules. Which of these traps lure you most often? How can you avoid them?
2. When you were a teenager, how did your parents discipline you? Were they hands-off? Did they use physical punishments or humiliation? Did they follow through on the consequences they threatened? Ask yourself which aspects of their disciplinary techniques helped you acquire an ethical sense, and which aspects left you feeling rejected or ashamed.
3. Think of three or four common teen misdeeds and come up with an example of *teshuvah* for each. Share these with the group.
4. Quickly, name your child's five worst traits. Don't think too hard! Now recast each as a talent, gift, or positive attribute. Resist sarcasm. How can you provide your child with channels for the productive expression of these traits?
5. Explore your double standards (we all have them) by answering the questions on page 152. Can you spot any contradictions between what you say and what you do? Can you make changes? What obstacles do you anticipate facing if you try to improve?

Session Eight

Reading Assignment:

Chapter Nine. The Blessing of a Hangover: A Sanctified Approach to Substances and Sex

Chapter Ten. The Courage to Let Them Go

1. What did your parents or childhood religion teach you about the role of pleasure in life? Were you taught that sex or inebriation is shameful? Were you around adults who couldn't control their drinking, drug use or other impulsive behaviors? How do these experiences affect the way you are raising your teen?
2. What is your stance toward teenage experimentation? Are you the pleasure police? Or do you cover your eyes, ears, and intuition?
3. Were you surprised by my philosophy that teens may benefit from experimentation with substances and physical affection while they are still under their parents' protection? How do you feel about expecting teens to remain celibate and sober until they are in college or on their own?
4. When your teen approaches you about a delicate topic, do you tend to overreact? Or underreact? What strategies can you use to remain composed while feeling embarrassed or unsure?
5. Come up with a couple of situations in which a parent might have to make a difficult decision about a child's readiness. (Some ideas: A teenager wants to go out with a friend whom you distrust; wants to study in the bedroom with friends of the opposite sex; asks you to help procure birth control.) Ask yourself how a thoughtful parent

would break down the request and apply the “natural laboratory” concept to make a decision. Role-play the request with another parent in the group.

6. Where do you stand on the concept of “friends with benefits”?
7. Do you agree with the idea of “truthiness” as a parental stance?
8. Take an inventory of your daily delight quotient. How might you bring more sensual pleasures into your life?
9. When your child leaves home to attend college or live independently, do you expect to feel as sad as the father in chapter ten? Or mostly nervous? Or joyful? Or relieved? Or all four? If your child has attended sleepaway camp or an out-of-town program, use your reaction to that experience as a guide.

Conclusion

It’s so enlightening and such a relief to get together with other parents who are fellow travelers in the desert of adolescence that it may be as difficult to end your group as it was to begin it. When the eight sessions are over, say a warm goodbye...or exchange email addresses or become Facebook friends with those members whose company you particularly enjoyed. You can also consider holding further meetings. The Jewish custom of the *havurah*, a small group of people who meet regularly to celebrate Shabbat, lifecycle events, and holidays, provides a model for a possible Promised Land for parents, especially those who have an empty nest facing them in the near future.