

Guiding Complex Teens and Young Adults to Launch

A PARADIGM

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ARE YOUR COMPLEX TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS less independent than you'd like? Are they resistant to your advice or guidance? Whether they're living at home or independently, are you supporting them more than you think you should? Worried it's too late to make a difference for their future? You're not alone!

Now more than ever, parents and their young adults are cohabiting in record numbers. About 52 percent of young Americans, ages 18 to 29, were living with a parent at the start of 2021 (Pew Research). For some families, this was expected. But when the global pandemic toppled established support structures, many young adults were adrift and/or back in their parents' homes, with both parents and their "kids" feeling somewhat (and understandably) resentful of that reality.

Is it worse for families with ADHD?

The situation is compounded in the world of ADHD. Young adults (often developmentally delayed in areas of executive function by as much as thirty percent) are already more likely to need additional support longer than their neurotypical peers, leaving parents worried and young adults frustrated. Additionally, families with ADHD are at higher risk than neurotypical families for power struggles, communication breakdowns, and disconnected or conflicted relationships.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a paper airplane against a warm, golden sunset background. The hand is in silhouette, gripping the fuselage of the plane. The paper wings are spread out, and the entire scene is bathed in the soft, orange glow of the setting sun. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the word 'SHIFT' in a serif font.

SHIFT

While parents want their kids to become independent, many factors interfere:

- Parents see their kids as capable but kids don't see it for themselves.
- Kids have magical thinking and don't (or can't) see their own challenges.
- Parents undermine (unintentionally) by rescuing or micromanaging, preventing kids from learning from successes or mistakes.
- Parents withhold appropriate support, believing the kids "should" be able to do it on their own.
- Parents don't know how to provide incremental, measured support.

Underlying these dynamics are two complicating realities:

- **fundamental power conflicts** (i.e., young adults don't want to feel controlled or are hesitant to take control of their own lives)
- **ineffective communication** (i.e., years of built-up defensiveness and distrust lead parents and kids to repeat unhelpful patterns of communication)

What's a parent to THINK about it?

In 2021, parents of complex young adults with ADHD, anxiety, and autism sought help in record numbers. At ImpactParents, we responded by developing training programs and coaching groups specifically for them. The progress of over fifty families was surprisingly rapid. How could years of difficult dynamics be repaired in just a matter of months?

Parents were adopting new perspectives about their kids. As a result, the dynamic shifted, communication improved, and power struggles reduced. In hindsight, while there were dozens of tools taught to these parents, a paradigm shift based on the following four key concepts had the greatest impact: Understand and Accept; Practice Radical Compassion; Prioritize and Practice Calm, Respectful Communication; and Understand the Parent's Role in Collaborating and Supporting.

Understand and Accept

The mother of a twenty-year-old college student with ADHD was concerned that she hadn't done enough to prepare her daughter for college life. They'd actively treated their daughter's complex issues as a teenager, including investing in behavior training and coaching years before. They had built a strong relationship with their daughter based on trust and open communication. And her daughter was struggling.

"What more do you want?" I asked. She paused and then she smiled.

She had wanted her daughter to finish learning to manage her ADHD before leaving high school. Now, she realized that was never a realistic expectation. Her daughter's brain will develop through her mid-to-late twenties. It makes sense that her daughter would still be learning how to navigate herself in college.

And then, she realized the most important part. Her daughter had the tool she needed most: a strong relationship with her parents, built on trust, and she was asking for the help she needed.

Just because we would love for our kids to be ready to leave the nest when they turn eighteen, that doesn't make it a reasonable expectation. A respectful and supportive relationship is based on understanding your kid's reality and accepting it without judging them for it. With that foundation, they'll learn to ask for and accept the help they're going to need in life, which will set them up for long-term success.

Practice Radical Compassion

What if your kid's snarkiness, push-back, avoidance, distance—or whatever behavior is driving you crazy—is an expression of their own concerns? What if they are actually frustrated, scared, anxious, sad, disappointed in themselves, overwhelmed, or more? As Ross Greene teaches, behaviors are symptoms. Kids will do well when they can; when they can't, they need our compassion instead of judgment—because something difficult is happening for them.

Everyone wants to be seen. To be heard. To be acknowledged. Especially complex young adults. What they need more than just about anything from their parents is acceptance that their "difficult" behaviors have very little to do with their parents. They are an expression of a young adult feeling out of control.

In *The Essential Guide to Raising Complex Kids* I explain, "It's hard to remember that our kids aren't avoiding work just to be rude, difficult, or disrespectful. They don't have a mechanism to get themselves activated, organized, or self-regulated. And they find that embarrassing (and demoralizing)." Our kids need to feel like we're on their team and they want us to acknowledge when things are tough for them. Whether they're living at home or on their own, it takes more effort for them to do the fundamentals of living like managing food, laundry, work, school, health care, or friendships. Honestly, "adulting" can be overwhelming. They need us to show that we see the challenges they're facing with compassion for their steep learning curve.



When our kids aren't doing what we think they could to help themselves, they may be doing the best they can. If it's not "good enough" yet, you can help with that—if you offer help with compassion, on their terms. What would be different in your relationship if you were to show authentic compassion for where they are (or aren't) in life? If you were to acknowledge what's difficult for them? Try "I'm sorry this is so difficult for you. Would you be open to letting me help you with that?" instead of lecturing them or offering unsolicited advice.

Prioritize and Practice Calm, Respectful Communication

Above all else this year, parents of young adults in our groups learned to prioritize calm: getting calm, staying calm, and only having conversations when everyone is calm. Despite all the tools and skills we teach parents so they can have more respectful conversations, nothing

works until everyone is calm. The work of calming down is a high priority, and it's easier said than done.

This is fundamentally true for everyone—with or without ADHD, young and old alike. When human brains are triggered, the primitive brain takes over and we're not available for rational decision-making. You can't demand that someone operate from their rational brain. If your young adult responds to "we have to talk" feeling like a saber-toothed tiger is at the door, it doesn't matter how rational you are, they won't hear you. If anyone is on high alert (e.g., defensive) or in a full-blown freak-out (e.g., screaming or avoiding), effective communication and problem-solving can't happen.

Now, it's easy to say that these kids are causing you to get angry, frustrated, annoyed, disappointed, or fearful. Your feelings are real. But your kids are not causing them. You're the grown-up, and they are yours to manage. It's up to you to find ways to calm down before you engage in

any conversation. The change starts with you.

It may also be that you're approaching conversations calmly, but your young adult is triggered. To request calm conversations without judgment, get curious about what's happening with your child. Reread the section above on radical compassion and ask yourself questions like: What's hard for them? What patterns do we have that leave them feeling unheard? Are they embarrassed or ashamed? Are they afraid they can't fulfill expectations? Does it just feel like it's too hard to even try?

While staying calm is difficult, its importance cannot be overstated. It sends a message to your kids that you value treating them with respect. Staying calm is fundamental to effective communication, and ultimately necessary for problem-solving. Everything you want to achieve in your relationship with your kids starts with calm, respectful communication. So, when things start to escalate, make a commitment to stop, reclaim your brain, and continue only after everyone is calm. You'll be amazed at the difference it makes.

Understand the Parent's Role in Collaborating and Supporting

Take a moment to visualize what you want for your relationship with your kids long term. Do you want them to become independent and come to you for sage advice when they are adults? Do you want to be actively involved in their lives and their families over time?

Now, pay attention to your role in the current family dynamic, and be honest with yourself. Are your behaviors helping to move the relationship toward your vision? Or are you frequently finding yourself in a power play? Are your natural responses—like resentment, sadness, fear, frustration, overwhelm, guilt, shame, or confusion—in some way contributing to their responses of defiance, avoidance, or denial?

Young adults have a natural, developmental need to separate and become independent beings. But many parents struggle with letting go, especially when their kids have not yet learned to manage their ADHD. The irony is that if parents hold the reins too tight, their kids don't have a chance to take the reins for themselves. Kids end up feeling out of control, and the cycle continues.

Four phases of empowerment

Parents are in the best position to guide young adults to take ownership of their lives—with support, encouragement, and open communication. Your kids may not be ready for the independence they desperately want, but they don't need you to point that out to them whenever they miss a step. Instead, they need you to believe in them, especially when they're not sure they believe in themselves.

There are four phases of empowerment for parents to prepare kids for independence. Many parents of complex kids either get

stuck in Phase 1 (Directing) or give up out of frustration.

Complex young adults need their parents to move back and forth between Phase 2 (Collaboration) and Phase 3 (Support) for many years before their kids are ready for them to move into Phase 4 (Champion). As you'll see below, during each phase the focus shifts; also included are samples of the way you would communicate with your complex kid.

Phase 1: Director

Focus: Direct Action and Motivate Engagement

"Tonight you have math and history homework. Why don't you have a snack and do homework before dinner, so we can play a game later?"

Phase 2: Collaborator

Focus: Begin to Share Agenda, Motivate Ownership, Model Organization

"Here are times available to get your homework done. Are you clear about what needs to be done, or shall we go over it together? When and where do you want to do it? Can I help you plan anything? How will you reward yourself when you're done?"

Phase 3: Supporter

Focus: Support their Ownership, Encourage Asking for Help

"Seems like you're on top of things—can we talk about it for a minute? What's your plan? What help do you think you might need? Who might be able to help? Is there anything I can do to support you?"

Phase 4: Champion

Focus: Empower, Celebrate, and Troubleshoot

"How's it going? I hope you're proud of how you're handling things. What are you celebrating lately? Are you struggling with anything? Will you let me know if you want some help in any way?"

When your kids want to be more independent but are not ready for it, yet, accept that. Show compassion for how that must feel for them. Stay calm and focus on your role, asking yourself, "What do they need from me right now?" Most often you'll find they need your acceptance, understanding, compassion, and calm. And then, they need you to get about the difficult and important work of collaborating and supporting, again and again, until they're ready to fly on their own. 🦋



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