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Disclaimer

PARENTS FORUM is not a substitute for medical, psychiatric or psychological advice, for professional parenting education or for other counseling.

Readers are urged to consult their health care advisors or other appropriate professionals about specific concerns or problems.

Dedication

To parents around the world and all those who care for children and support parents.

Beginnings

Chapter Two

PARENTS FORUM grew out of a serious family crisis. Some years ago, one of my teenage children started getting into trouble both in and out of school and began drinking and using other drugs. Within a year, his behavior was out of control. Despite the efforts of teachers, doctors, counselors and court officers who all tried to help us, his father and I did not find effective, long-term support for our son or ourselves in any traditional setting. My husband and I had separated not long before our son's problems began and we later divorced. In looking back, I don't believe that my son's misbehavior caused the divorce or that the divorce caused his misbehavior -- although certainly each made the other more difficult to handle. I do think, however, that the roots of both may be traced to difficulties we all had in communicating our feelings.

In our early search for help, the focus was always on my son but, in fact, I was as troubled as he was and didn't realize it. My fear and anger, my "control-o-mania," got in the way of everything! Successful resolution of our shared problems eventually came when we participated in a therapeutic community focused on recovery from addiction, particularly alcohol and other drug abuse. The program, which my ex-husband found for us through a friend, succeeded in helping us all make positive changes. I often wonder now whether improving our communications skills earlier would have helped us avoid many of the conflicts we experienced. At the very least, better communication skills would have helped us manage those conflicts more effectively and treat each other more respectfully. We found the help our family needed through Straight New England, a day-treatment program for young people with substance abuse problems. Founded in the mid-1980s, Straight was a controversial program

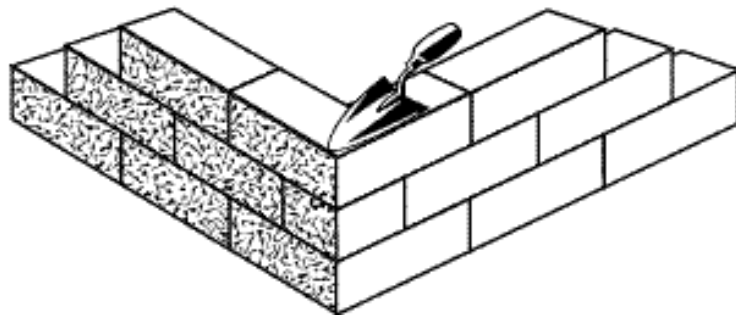
that has since disbanded. Its unique residential component placed new clients in the homes of families of other young people who had been in the program several months or more. Parents received support for their own recovery (from "co-alcoholism" or codependency) as well as training in how to guide their own child and their "host son" or "host daughter" on the path to recovery.

Professional addictions recovery staff directed the daily treatment, interviewed parents and monitored the "host homes" to assure compliance with state safety regulations. Funded in part by families' medical insurance, through fees assessed to parents and by fundraising undertaken by parents, the program had its critics -- and it certainly did not work for everyone. But when it worked, as it did in our case, it seemed to work miracles. The angry, self-destructive teenager we brought to Straight became, over the course of twenty months, a confident and purposeful young man.

As clients in Straight for almost two years, our troubled son, his brothers, his father and I, along with several hundred other families, learned how substance abuse affects both individuals and families. In Straight we learned that alcoholism, or any addiction, is basically a disease of the feelings. With a lot of hard work, my ex-husband and I each succeeded in rebuilding our relationship with our son. This rebuilding was preceded by some "un-building," as we examined our past experiences to discover the interlocking, unhealthy roles we each played under the influence of substance abuse. To accomplish this, we were charged with two main tasks. First, we had to learn to be emotionally honest, that is, to allow ourselves to experience our feelings and, as appropriate, to express feelings, thoughts and

desires in words without blaming ourselves or others. Second, we had to learn to expect and encourage others to do the same.

Since that desperate time, now happily over, I have seen how putting the lessons of recovery to work in day-to-day family situations can dramatically alter one's perspective even if it does not always alter the outcome of the situation. I've found that the usefulness of these lessons extends to situations involving difficult people and challenges at work and elsewhere outside family life.



In the Straight parent network, none of us worried about the differences of race, religion, class or social standing that can loom large in ordinary life. We focused instead on the collective safety and individual recovery of our young people and, with those shared concerns foremost in our minds, we helped each other out. In their daily group meetings, our teenagers talked about past injuries they had suffered -- and injuries they had inflicted -- in their families, and they confronted each other about following the steps to recovery and the rules of the program. In twice weekly parent meetings, we adults did the same.

A central element in our parent meetings involved reevaluating a past incident we recalled -- for example, a night when a teen came home drunk, or didn't come home at all, or a time when the police called after stopping a young person for reckless driving -- and describing our feelings about the incident without accusing or shaming the young person. Limiting the discussion to one specific incident was essential, as it kept us from launching into a series of accusations ("And another thing...!") and kept both parent and young person "on the same page." Through this exercise, we parents helped each other learn to separate our feelings from our thoughts and to express both without labeling our teenagers. We also learned to separate our feelings about our kids -- love, admiration, hope -- from our feelings about their misbehaviors -- disappointment, disapproval, desperation.

Over time, we learned how to have honest and, at the same time, sensitive conversations about our differences, how to be both clear and respectful in discussing difficult issues. In my family, these conversations, at first awkward, were a refreshing change from the yelling, name-calling and swearing, and from the troubled, punishing silences that marked the time when my son was actively using alcohol and other drugs.

These conversations were different, too, from the negative view of family life too often portrayed in television situation comedies, where insult is humor and put-downs are frequently viewed as victories. In fact, to reduce this negative influence, television viewing for Straight families was restricted to a single approved video or a special broadcast on Sundays. Listening to the radio or to recorded music was also restricted, since the program's

philosophy held that the messages contained in news shows and popular music undermined the recovery work that was our focus.

Straight clients and their families progressed through five phases before completing the program. First-phase clients, called "newcomers," were required to focus on themselves as individuals. In second phase, we focused on relationships with family and friends. In third phase the recovering young people went back to school or to work. In fourth phase they were given days off, taking responsibility for planning outings and activities free from alcohol and other drugs. Finally, in fifth phase, both young people and parents were given the privilege of standing at the side of group, in positions of authority, at our community meetings.

We drove seemingly endless miles to attend Monday and Friday night parent meetings and to take recovering young people to meet the van ferrying them six days a week to the treatment center outside Boston. Sharing lukewarm potluck dinners, we gathered in the carpeted reception area of a large warehouse building, to socialize before the recovery-focused meetings. These always lasted too



long, testing our commitment, I guess! In and out of meetings, we cried and laughed and sang. Day by day, helping each other, we got better.

If a client in a higher phase ran from the program, the progression was interrupted. After returning or being brought back from "cop-outs," clients had to repeat the five-phase sequence starting with Phase One. This practice reinforced the importance of focusing on oneself and served a valuable purpose: holding teens and parents each accountable for their own individual recovery.

Long before I found myself involved in recovery with my family, when I began raising my boys years ago, I knew I wanted to be different from my own parents. But I didn't know how to make changes or even where to look for models. Although they loved me, my parents misused their strength and power. They doubtless had few models for effective conflict resolution and, as a result, their disagreements sometimes led to shouting, or worse, to breaking each others' possessions. Both the disagreements and the destruction terrified me. The fear I sometimes felt made me treasure all the more dearly the many happy times -- exploring the woods, raising chickens and goats, celebrating birthdays and doing ordinary art projects, crafts and gardening -- that formed the positive foundation of our family life. Unfortunately, while it may be true that the positive experiences took up more time in my childhood, it is my parents' rageful outbursts that occupy center stage in my childhood memories.

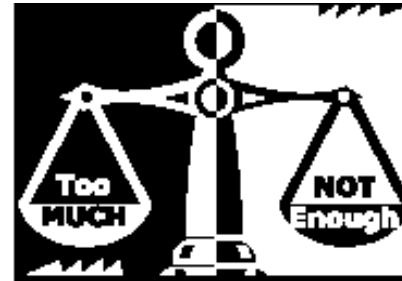
As a mother of young children, I repeated many of the creative activities that were so memorable for me as a child. At the same time, I found myself engaging in conflicts with my husband and my sons that were painfully similar to those I remembered from my own growing-up. While I struggled to provide adequate measures of love and positive discipline for my sons, minor conflicts, over

dinnertime or baths, chores or television, easily became major ones.

When the boys were little, I could not see my part in these conflicts. In my son's recovery program, however, I learned how the tone of voice and choice of words in my response -- and whether I responded or not -- could help or hinder a peaceful resolution of conflict. As I learned to let go of the "control-omania" that was my addiction, I gave my son room to recover from his alcohol and other drug dependency. I became more solution-oriented as a parent and as a person.

Now that the crisis of my son's teenage years has passed, I can look back and see how other parents, both within the Straight community and beyond, helped me in my efforts to make positive changes and how, in our friendships, we refined our communications skills and created some new models for parenting. Day-to-day, my friends listen to me, sympathize with me, and encourage me. And so do my children, now. They also give me honest criticism, if I ask them.

A few years back, a co-worker related a story that gave me a painful flashback to my own now-distant crazy days. He had been riding the subway to work and saw a woman with a playful seven-year-old boy in tow, probably her son. She said to the boy, "I'm gonna slap you... and I'm going to enjoy it. Keep it up, wiseass. I don't find you amusing at all." My coworker was shocked and wrote the woman's words down to give me, knowing I worked with parents. What can you say when you hear a stranger say something like that? Could you say gently, "It's



Letting go of my need to manage things that are not mine to manage has been an uneven and difficult process with both intellectual and emotional elements. I may know in my head that one of my

boys doesn't need help with a challenge he faces, but in my heart I want to do something for him. The reverse may also be true: I might be quite at ease not offering any assistance but have a nagging thought that I should say or do something to help, and I have to depend on my sons, who are now adults, to tell me if this is so. Since our children's needs change frequently throughout their early years and into adulthood as well, it can be a challenge to strike the right balance: to do enough, but not too much.

rough getting out early like this. He'll be fine." Most of us, out of the hurt or fear or embarrassment that underlies anger, at one time or another use words we regret in speaking to our children. Don't you imagine that the woman on the subway was raised in a climate of verbal abuse and probably physical abuse as well? From other parents and in parent education programs, I have learned ways of handling my own emotional travel so that, for the most part, I can steer clear of such destructive confrontations as the one just described.

On a daily basis, I have to realize and accept that my children's lives are their own, separate and independent from mine. Ultimately, this perspective has improved my ability to listen to them.

I can usually hear what they have to say without recalling or re-experiencing the anger, fear and sadness that colored so much of the past. If strong feelings do come up for me in a conversation or an argument with one of my children, and I cannot resolve them then and there, I know enough to call a friend and ask for support, perspective and advice.

By talking with other parents and asking yourself hard questions about your motivations, you can see your family situation more clearly. Even if you find yourself veering off the happy and loving path you first envisioned for yourself and your family, you will be able to identify problems when they are still manageable. You may also be better able to seek

More than once, my youngest son said to me when I was on the verge of losing either my composure or my temper, "Mom, you need to call Bonny."



Bonny is a long-time good friend who has A-number-one listening skills! My son had learned that if someone listens to his mother for a bit, she would be more able to listen to him. Perhaps a young person's endorsement is the best consumer report for the practice of parents listening to each other!

the advice and support of family and friends, or professional help if necessary, before a situation becomes critical.

I have seen myself and my children make small, consistent changes in the way we communicate with each other. They are young adults, turning 25, 33 and 35 the year of this online publication. All three are married and I treasure the growing friendships I share with each of my daughters in-law. My sons no longer need the kind of mothering I so enjoyed giving in the past. In a way, we are both farther apart and closer now. The space allows the intimacy first to happen and then to grow. I no longer pretend, or even aspire, to be a "supermom." Instead, I am content that we speak to each other often. We share worries, joys, plans and sometimes just listen to each other. On occasion, I find I need to apologize for something I've said or done and they do the same. What do you know... we're human!

Other parents have helped me. I hope this book helps you to ask for and get what you need from other parents and others in your community. We can help each other.