Parenting teens: Navigating the untidy, unplugged and unpredictable

In a fast-paced, complex world, has the rulebook for raising adolescents been rewritten?

Robin Chenoweth: Some things about parenting adolescents never really change. The untidy bedroom.

Just_Jazzy, Instagram: I really wanted her to explain to me, do you not find anything wrong with this room? Apparently, she doesn't. She told me she'll clean it when it gets dirty.

Robin Chenoweth: The disagreements.

projectparent TikTok: Teens will be the first to tell you that your nagging is what makes them not want to do the chore at all.

Robin Chenoweth: The rejection.

TikTok, Michael Fasulo: I'm losing them to their phones, to their new hobbies and interests as they've matured, their bedrooms. They want to go up in that bedroom and shut their door and be on the phone to their friends and play games with their friends online. … I'm struggling with this.

Robin Chenoweth: It's true that once upon a time, every parent was an adolescent. Has being a teen or preteen really changed all that much? Didn't we all give our parents the same kind of angst that parents experience now? Did you?

Darren Parsons: If they would have only known what I was up to, I would have been very difficult.

Robin Chenoweth with Darren Parsons: They didn't know?

Darren Parsons: There was so much leeway back then to, that you're just let out in the world, and you went and came back at dinner time. That's so far removed from what we do with our kids. … To shove them out the door, to just be bored, is a foreign concept. Yeah, there's no more boredom, and that's a big part of this.

Robin Chenoweth: Because so many aspects of adolescence have been reshaped by the world we live in, does the rulebook for parenting them need to be rewritten? What has changed? And what remains the same?

Becky Koenig: I think the world moves very fast.

Branden Smith: Those headlines, that sensationalism, that division didn't exist. So, my parents were focused on different things with us.

Alicia Mowery: They have all of these opportunities, and they're encouraged to jump on them earlier, be good at them earlier, to know if they want to be a pro soccer player by the time they're 10. Do they want to be an astronaut and, what, what are they missing out on if they don't check all the right boxes and do all the right things?

Ashley Hicks: Because our young people are experiencing, so much more reported anxiety, depression and mental health concerns. I think parents are struggling with that in particular because … well, what do I do? Where do I go for help?

Darren Parsons: It's a different world.

Robin Chenoweth: In this episode of the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we talk to five parents — and one grandparent — about the special challenges and joys of raising adolescents in this age of information and interconnectedness. And we get advice on handling the skirmishes, dealing with technology and having meaningful conversations with your teen or preteen, from Ashley Hicks, director of Ohio State's Couple and Family Therapy Clinic. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Maya Stepnick and Jason Amo-Mensah are our student interns. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. Though it might not always seem like it, experts know a lot more about the adolescent brain and psyche than when we were growing up. Here's Becky Koenig, mom to a 13-year-old daughter.

Becky Koenig: I grew up in the 80s, which was to me a fabulous time to grow up. But when I was 11, my parents had gotten divorced.

Robin Chenoweth: Her father, with help from her grandparents and family friends, raised her.

Becky Koenig: He was just a terrific father during those formative years, you know, taught me a lot about, a lot about money. Because I didn't steal, but I took his credit cards and went shopping.

Robin Chenoweth with Becky Koenig: Oh, he was okay with that?

Becky Koenig: He was not okay with that. So, I paid back everything that I bought, which was fine. But yeah, it was … it was a really difficult, a really difficult time to be without a mom.

Robin Chenoweth: Neuroscientists now know that during adolescence, the brain is developing almost as much as it does in a child's first year. And the changes are among the most significant and impactful developments ever to happen in the brain. Areas that manage judgment and impulses — like going on a shopping spree with your dad's plastic — are many years from being fully developed. If you ask yourself, "What were they thinking?"… chances are they were thinking, just not in an organized or efficient way. Here's Ashley Hicks, clinical associate professor of human development and family science in the College of Education and Human Ecology, and director of the OSU Couple and Family Therapy Clinic.

Ashley Hicks: In adolescence, our brains are changing and growing fairly rapidly as well. We know they're not fully developed until we get about 25, at least the frontal lobe isn't fully developed, and that's where we're thinking about decision-making and impulse control and that kind of thing.

Robin Chenoweth with Ashley Hicks: Executive function, right?

Ashley Hicks: Executive function, yeah.

Robin Chenoweth with Ashley Hicks: I've heard that term thrown around a lot.

Ashley Hicks: As a teenager, though, we're taking in a lot of information. Our brain is taking it in rapidly and kind of deciding what do I do with this information? What makes sense? It's not quite the same as a infant who's saying, like, oh, I put this in my mouth that tastes good, that tastes bad. We're, like, processing it at a different level and trying to make meaning out of it. What does this mean or say about me?

Robin Chenoweth: Through all those experiences — hanging out with friends, making good and especially bad decisions — synapses are forming that allow neurons to send and receive signals in the brain. The more the brain practices, the more these tracks are reinforced, and a coating of a fatty substance called myelin forms around them, making them more efficient. The adolescent brain is wiring itself, sorting out which neurons and synapses to keep, and which ones will disappear. All of this impacts the decisions your preteen or teen makes, how they see themselves in the world and how they interact with you.

Ashley Hicks: And I think part of what makes it so interesting is it's happening at the same time where both physiologically, our bodies are changing, and then we're having all of these hormonal changes that impact our mood and our functioning. So we're trying to take in all this content at the same time… . We used to call it this period of, like, storm

and stress. I like to think of it more as simply this period of transition where we're going through all of these different changes, and we're trying to figure out how to kind of stay upright.

Robin Chenoweth: Some parents seem hyper aware of these changes, and they're concerned. The lived experience of most teens and preteens has shifted. I talked to Darren Parsons, deputy chief information officer for the College of Education and Human Ecology, about the times he escaped with friends on bikes and did things that his parents never knew about. His son is 15, and his daughter is 13.

Robin Chenoweth with Darren Parsons: It's really different, isn't it?

Darren Parsons: It's completely different.

Robin Chenoweth with Darren Parsons: Do you think it's, though… was that a bad thing, or was that a good thing? Because you were forced to sort of negotiate the world and figure things out.

Darren Parsons: One hundred percent a good thing, because of that, you go out and fail and run into actual other kids and different ages, and there's some of that still, but not the way we had it back then. It's so much wrapped up in everybody having phones now, too, with cameras on them and video recorders on them and all of that. Most of what I did as a kid is impossible to get away with now.

Robin Chenoweth with Darren Parsons: Because somebody's taping you?

Darren Parsons: Always videotaping, everything's connected. Yeah, no, it's impossible to have what I had. It's a different world.

Robin Chenoweth with Darren Parsons: Do your kids get together with other kids? Is that happening, still?

Darren Parsons: They do. And I think the pandemic was a wake-up call. … We're close into the city. It's … was doable, but the mentality wasn't there for the parents just to be like, "Go out, find people, don't come back." That…that's gone away. So you have to orchestrate. You have to force your kids to do it. Otherwise they're just — the other part of a lot of this is — you're always battling against how fun video games are. … You could have kids in sports. So that's one thing. My kids get tons of exercise. So, it's orchestrated, specific. You meet with people; you have conflicts. All the failure almost completely comes from sports for my kids. But when they come home, they're just, you know, video games is a huge draw.

Robin Chenoweth: Before we wade into the technology, let's consider what research says about those other experiences that video games and social media have replaced, at least in part. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes in *The Anxious Generation* that kids in the 1980s began to be deprived of unsupervised play, responsibility and

opportunities to take risks. Cable television news fueled the shift, instilling so much fear that parents stopped letting kids ride bikes, run the neighborhood and play independently. But those activities promote competence, maturity and mental health, Haidt says. Risky and thrilling play common among juvenile mammals *and* humans — like fights, jumping from heights, moving at high speeds — actually help reduce certain phobias, one study cites. And research in 2023 shows that young people who are deprived of opportunities to take risk and explore independently will, on average, develop into more anxious and risk-averse adults. Which goes to show you that all those crazy things you did as a teenager served a purpose.

Brandon Smith: We've tried to find, for each of our three kids, what are those things that they seem drawn to, and how do we encourage that to the best of our ability?

Robin Chenoweth: Brandon Smith is chief information officer for Education and Human Ecology. He has two sons and a daughter, 10 to 17 years old.

Brandon Smith: Unstructured time now is a lot more dangerous, I think, than it used to be when we were kids.

Robin Chenoweth with Brandon Smith: Do you? Because, why?

Brandon Smith: Because when we were kids and you had unstructured time, at least for me, then it was my Matchbox cars and Legos or reading or going around the neighborhood and playing basketball or pickup football on the street. Your athletics were not structured. You weren't going to soccer practices as much as we were playing at the park.

Robin Chenoweth with Brandon Smith: A pickup game.

Brandon Smith: It was a pickup game. Pickup games don't happen anymore. ,,, Unstructured time now means that you can fill that gap with scrolling or with gaming, or binging Netflix, or whatever happens to be. So again, that's, that's one of those things that's both those balancing acts of like wanting them to be independent and free but also knowing that my oldest doesn't want to read books anywhere like I used to. … I mean, my kids talk more about, “Hey, did you see the cinematography?” and how they use the rule of thirds in that shot. I've got my two oldest, my 14- and my 17-year-old, who have conversations about cuts in movies, and you know, how the color palette is in this thing, and talking about the arc of a story in terms from story writers I've never heard from before. They’re talking about those things.

Robin Chenoweth: So, maybe there’s a trade-off? To be sure, most adolescents aren’t getting into the kind of trouble their parents might have. Teenage pregnancy is down. Drinking is, too. But teens also are dating less. In 2023, people younger than 25 socialized in person 35 percent less than they did in 2003, according to the American Time Use Survey. Ashley Hicks.

Ashley Hicks: Potentially because of the shift in how we engage with each other and more parasocial relationships via social media, we do lose out on some things. And so I think some young people may be losing out on, what does it look like to have a conversation with someone about something, where we maybe disagree, and then we figure out at the end how to go and hang out and play after? Versus like on social media, we get to disagree. I get to say whatever I want to say with you, and then I get to log out and not think about it, or just lives there, and somebody else joins the conversation.

Robin Chenoweth: Darren Parsons parents his teens assuming that anxiety among adolescents goes beyond decreased socialization.

Darren Parsons: As far as the technology is concerned, and the amount, it's not screen time, it's the type of screen time and the constant need for the dopamine rush. It's, it's the whole *Dopamine Nation* book, if you're familiar with it. … But, if you're playing a video game and you're solving a problem on a PS5, those have merit. It's the short form videos, the Instagram feeds, it's the…

Robin Chenoweth with Darren Parsons: TikTok.

Darren Parsons: It's that these kids are getting addicted to period, and it's affecting everything else. … There's a rule: You're either getting something out of this technology or it's getting something out of you, I think is kind of what we say. And it's, it's literally true.

Robin Chenoweth: Becky Koenig.

Becky Koenig: We face a challenge every day. She does have a phone. She does chores every week, and she pays me for it. So she is responsible for it. She knows that if she doesn't do her chores and she doesn't get paid, then she doesn't pay for her phone and she won't have her phone. … You know, she does have time limits on it. Her apps have time limits on it. Anytime that she wants to do anything outside of the quote, unquote, what we have designated as normal, she has to ask us. I wish I could have put this off much longer, but we didn't, and we have set boundaries.

Robin Chenoweth: Setting limits is essential, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than four hours of screen time per day for teens has been linked to poor sleep, fatigue and symptoms of anxiety and depression, the CDC says. Remember, these habits are forming at a time of critical brain development. All of which makes parenting a preteen or teen today difficult in a way that it wasn't for our parents. And yet, parents still face some of the same struggles that their parents did, especially getting adolescents to open up to them. Consider the teenager's closed bedroom door. Sandy Baker raised her daughter, Alicia Mowry, in the 1980s. Alicia is now raising two sons, including a 13-year-old. Even when Sandy was growing up in the 1960s, she retreated to her bedroom.

Sandy Baker: Then I flip flopped it on her when she was an adolescent. … When she'd come home from a long day of school followed by swim practice, and sometimes stayed for working, she'd come home and there I am again, talk, talk, talking. And she needed to decompress and shut her door, and she probably felt smothered. And I was feeling kind of shut out.

Robin Chenoweth: Take heart, parents. Listen to how Alicia responds to what her mom is saying.

Alicia Mowry: And the funny thing is, what I remember is that she was always interested in what I was doing. I had forgotten all those feelings of being kind of annoyed with the questions until she mentioned it this morning, and I remember a little bit of it. But more than anything, I remember that she was just always interested in what I was doing. … I think she did a good job of creating special moments. … We would get ice cream sundaes and call it dinner because it had..

Sandy Baker: We did?

Alicia Mowry: We did. It had fruit and dairy, and it covered all the food groups.

Robin Chenoweth with Alicia Mowery and Sandy Baker: Do you find yourself trying to incorporate those same things with your own boys?

Alicia Mowry: I do. Sort of unintentionally, I realize I'm emulating what she did after the fact. … So my oldest son is 13, and I feel like if I asked him a lot about his day all the time, he might have that reaction of wanting to shut me out. So, we find these little moments. … So I'll drive into a parking lot of a gas station — and we call it getting a car cookie. We'll run in and we'll grab a cookie, and we'll just sit in the car and have a little snack. And for five minutes, we listen to whatever music he wants to listen to. He tells me about his day. We talk about things. He's also gotten interested in going to the gym. And I'm not a night person. I like to be home in my pajamas by 8:30. But at 8:30 he comes alive, and he wants to go to the gym. So, so we go to the gym, and he tells me about his day, and we talk about what's going on in his life. … I found this sweet spot where he'll tell me things.

Robin Chenoweth: Those are moments that Ashley Hicks calls rituals of connection. And in this age of hyperconnectivity and yet self-imposed isolation, these times are more critical than ever for adolescents.

Ashley Hicks: With the time you do have with your adolescents, how do you make that time meaningful? So part of that is engaging with what I think is a collaborative conversation or process to say, like, how are we going to spend time together? What do we want to do? What do we want to talk about? … How do we create an environment that is set up in such a way that says we care enough about each other that we're going to share? I can trust that if I ask some questions that you're going to respond with care and not with ...

Robin Chenoweth with Ashley Hicks: Judgment or condemnation.

Ashley Hicks: Frustration or anger, yeah. And that takes time and building trust. So I think if we're in a place where maybe we currently have a contentious relationship with our young person, start by listening and trying to engage in conversation with them. I know that's easier said than done, because I work with clients, don't want to, you know, talk to their parents or vice versa. But how do we slowly start to think about how we can build those rituals of connection, whether that's a daily conversation or an activity we do together, so that we can get a sense of like who they are as a person, not just as your child.

Robin Chenoweth with Ashley Hicks: The relationship between parents and teens, you know, like just historically, have been contentious. … My mom and my sister fought like crazy, but they're so close now. So just having that friction doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to be carried into adulthood, right?

Ashley Hicks: Right. Conflict isn't inherently bad. Conflict simply just means there's something that we're have a misunderstanding about, there's something that we are disagreeing about. There's some tension there, and we have to work it out. …What would it look like to say to that young person, you know, I'm getting real frustrated, and I really want to hear you out, and I really want you to hear me. Let's just take five minutes and come back together. Like, what would that teach them about how that maybe in other conversations, they could take a pause, they could take a break and come back around.

Robin Chenoweth: Becky Koenig.

Becky Koenig: If she's hurt, whether it's emotionally or physically, she always comes to me first. My husband, her dad, is the fun guy. She thinks that he's great, but I'm the one that, you know, gives the discipline. …. Talks to her about, … She came to me a couple weeks ago and said that a boy asked her to be his girlfriend. And, you know, she was very excited about it.

Robin Chenoweth with Becky Koenig: Hmm. And you weren't, right?

Becky Koenig: Well, I was like, “Well, tell me about this boy.” And the Internet and, you know, Dr Google is amazing. So there are, there are a lot of things that we have access to as parents that my parents did not have access to.

Robin Chenoweth: Research has demonstrated over and again that the bond between adolescents and their caregivers is the most important one.

Ashley Hicks: The relationship between the parents, the caregivers and the child is so important. And that's one of those central places that, if you don't feel like you belong anywhere else, if we can kind of create relationship enough, where you where they feel

like you care and they belong with you, then that can help sort of establish these ones outside. Of course, we know that social relationships, peer relationships can be really important for adolescents, and at the same time, that doesn't negate how important those family relationships are too.

Robin Chenoweth with Ashley Hicks: They're critical, aren't they?

Ashley Hicks: Yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: That dovetails into what social scientists say is the importance of “mattering.” Kids who have healthy self-esteem feel like they matter to their parents; they feel important and significant, not just in their families, but in their communities.

Brandon Smith: As a parent, that's the thing I want the most, is, I want my kids to feel that they matter — that they matter in their community, that they matter to us. … It makes you feel wanted in a place. It makes you feel encouraged to go to a place or hang out with a group of people or to contribute. It helps battle through those times when you need to be resilient, when you are having a hard time getting something done. It gives you people you can go to when you're when you're dealing with struggles. So, the term of mattering, I think, is probably one of the most important things I could look at. … We want to make sure our kids know that we see them all as three individuals, right? And that neither one of their talents is greater than the others. … Them feeling mattered has helped them make significant changes in their psyche, and it helps improve the other things in their lives.

Robin Chenoweth: Adolescents naturally assert independence, placing what might seem like an outsized value on friendships. Alicia Mowry.

Alicia Mowry: I'll tell my 13-year-old, this is natural for you to want to push against us. This is what keeps you from wanting to live in our basement forever and never move out. Like, this is what we want.

Robin Chenoweth: And though they might have just slammed that bedroom door again, or never took out the trash, research shows that teens and preteens care deeply about what their parents think. Brandon Smith.

Brandon Smith: Nothing cuts the quick than a teenager, you know, rebelling against a mother and not sharing or not giving an answer when an answer is wanted. And so, I do think there's times when parents are challenged. And even if you know, like, yes, the kids at this point, they're a certain age. Their hormones, their development says they need to be more independent. They're going to rebel, even if it doesn't look like they're outwardly rebelling. They're trying to become more independent. Hearing that doesn't make that parent feel any better.

Robin Chenoweth with Brandon Smith: It's an explanation at least, right?

Brandon Smith: What's important, and I try to look for these opportunities, and I try to make sure that my wife sees them as well as, like, but look what she did. Look what he did. Like, when we weren't around, or when we finally talked to their teachers or their coaches or whatever, listen to the feedback that we're getting. Like, they're a joy to have in class. I have conversations with them that are exciting and engaging. And so you hear that feedback about your own kids, and you're like, they are listening. They are picking up.

Robin Chenoweth with Brandon Smith: They are.

Brandon Smith: They may say things like, leave me alone; or they may disappear into their rooms as soon as they get home, and you don't see them again until you have to drag them out for dinner. But they're absorbing every little bit of it.