

LISTEN BEFORE YOU LECTURE: 27 LESSONS FOR PARENTS OF TROUBLED ADOLESCENTS FROM A MIDDLE SCHOOL GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

先陪伴，再教養——讀懂孩 子不愛念書、手機滑不停背 後的困境，校園心理師給青 春期父母的 27 則心法

Packed with theory, exercises, real-world examples, and workable strategies, this invaluable parenting reference teaches parents to identify and respond to the psychological needs of their adolescent children. Starting from a foundation of self-awareness, parents can learn to re-open the channels of communication with their teenage children, and discover the optimal solutions for their families.

Falling grades, internet addiction, telling lies, a stand-offish attitude... the list of adolescent affronts to parents' sensibilities goes on and on. But how often do we pause to wonder whether these problematic behaviors of adolescence might actually be important survival strategies? Are teenagers really that hard to talk to, or do parents simply not understand how to communicate with them?

As a professional counselling psychologist and mother, author Tsai



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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

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Yi-Fang understands the difficult problems that concern parents. With this book, she discusses a variety of situations and issues, and supplies practical exercises (such as listing the phrases they most often repeat to their children, then rewriting them as “I” statements) to help them strengthen their rapport with their children.

The first part of the book is dedicated to commonly encountered academic issues. The second part teaches parents how to listen to the language of their children. In the third part, the author addresses problem behaviors like rule-breaking and lying, explaining the thinking that motivates these behaviors. The fourth part advises parents on how to weather their children’s outbursts and other emotional issues, including depression. The fifth part explores attachment theory, reflecting on the significance of the parent-child relationship, and the lifelong impact it has on the child’s later relationships. The sixth part brings the discussion back to the parents themselves, focusing on the necessity for self-care and grounding as part of the journey of mutual growth they share with their child.

More than just a guidebook to parenting adolescents, *Listen Before You Lecture* is a lifeline for parents in difficult seas. From a foundation of extensive professional and personal experience, the author advocates a deeper understanding of adolescence, helping confused and disappointed parents find the healing, affirmation, and renewed energy and direction they need for raising their children.

Tsai Yi-Fang 蔡宜芳

Author Tsai Yi-Fang holds a master’s degree in Educational Psychology and Counseling from Taiwan Normal University. She has worked in a variety of settings including hospitals and community and campus mental health clinics. Currently, she serves as a middle school guidance counselor while also writing a column and giving lectures on parenting. Her previous works include *Catch a Falling Youth: My Work with Wounded Children and Their Troubled Families*.

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By Tsai Yi-Fang

Translated by Petula Parris

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When Your Teen Is a Passive Learner: Map Out Achievable Small Steps

During my talks, one of the most common questions I encounter from parents is: “My child doesn’t enjoy studying! They have such a negative attitude toward learning and need constant reminders to do their homework. What can I do?”

I believe that that very few children have this problem when they first enter elementary school. As such, we should ask: What causes this kind of behavior to develop?

When Chiu was in third grade, his parents divorced. Chiu’s father and grandmother were adamant they would continue to look after Chiu, the only grandson, while Chiu’s mother moved out with his little sister. Paranoid that Chiu’s mother might try to abscond with Chiu, his father would often shun her visits. For a good while, Chiu’s mother was only able to see Chiu briefly at his school or afterschool day-care center.

Each day after elementary school, Chiu would first go to the afterschool center to complete his homework. When Chiu returned home later in the day, his father and grandmother left him largely unsupervised, allowing him to stay up playing video games until late at night.

When Chiu started junior high, his dad once again enrolled him in an afterschool program, this time at a cram school. However, it wasn’t long before Chiu started to skip cram school classes, sneaking off to play with friends, or simply returning straight home to play video games. As no one was keeping checks on him at home, and because he had also dropped off the cram school’s radar, Chiu became increasingly addicted to gaming and often left his homework untouched.

As Chiu’s overdue homework piled up, his homeroom teacher finally called Chiu’s father – only to learn that Chiu’s father had been living with a new girlfriend since Chiu was in fifth grade and therefore hadn’t been looking after Chiu at all. After speaking to the homeroom teacher, Chiu’s father was irate. He turned up at the family home to reprimand Chiu but, as with scoldings from Chiu’s aunts and cousins, this had little effect on Chiu’s behavior. As a last resort, Chiu’s grandmother sent Chiu back to live with his mother.

Initially, Chiu’s mother was overjoyed to have her son back. But it wasn’t long before their relationship began to sour. The more Chiu’s mother badgered Chiu to do his homework, the less he cooperated, leading to constant arguments. Chiu’s big sister would also get involved, berating Chiu for his “bad attitude” toward their mother.

As Chiu’s end-of-term exams approached, his mother attempted to help Chiu review each of his exam topics. The harder she tried, the less Chiu engaged. When it came to his actual exams, Chiu made zero effort whatsoever, simply ticking “A” for each question. As a result, Chiu failed all his end-of-term exams, leaving his poor mother distraught.

When I asked Chiu what had happened, he told me he wanted to prove he was dumb. He hoped everyone would then give up on him, leaving him to concentrate on his gaming.

Through his elementary school years, Chiu's grades had always been average in his class. It was only in junior high that his grades started to decline. He told me that, during the first year of junior high, he had tried hard to revise for one set of exams, thinking he had a chance of doing well. For some reason, his grades on that occasion dropped even further – so much so that he was ridiculed by his classmates.

Chiu explained: “When you don't review, it's normal to get low grades. But when you revise hard and still do badly... that's just embarrassing. It hurt my self-esteem and basically proves I'm stupid. I figured the best approach is to not bother revising and just guess the answers.” This perspective sheds light onto why Chiu was so reluctant to accept his mother's help before his exams.

Chiu even told me he'd prefer to go back to living with his grandma, where he could be left to play his video games in peace.

When I relayed this to his mother, she was overcome with emotion, bursting into tears in front of me.

No Child Starts Out Unwilling to Learn

By the time they enter junior high school, it is not unusual for some children to have pretty much given up on learning. Knowing they tried hard in elementary school, yet still got low grades, these children tell themselves: “I'm just not cut out for studying. What's the point in trying?”

I believe that every child has tried hard at some point. But for some children, their grades never seem to improve no matter how much effort they put in, resulting in endless frustration. Faced with growing academic pressure in junior and senior high school, these children no longer find any joy in learning and are, therefore, left with only exam scores and rankings. Even if they have tried (and certainly if they haven't!), once these children are met with disappointment or reproach from their parents, they become more critical of themselves.

In 1967, psychologist Martin Seligman discovered the now popular theory of “learned helplessness.” Seligman was conducting conditioning experiments on dogs, during which he subjected the dogs to electric shocks that they could not control. At first, the dogs would bark loudly and try to escape the shocks. When they eventually learned they could not, they stopped struggling, lay down, and silently endured the pain, their cries turning from loud barks to low whimpers.

After this, the dogs were placed in a box with a partition they could easily jump over to avoid the shocks. This time, when the dogs received electric shocks, they did not even attempt to jump over the partition; they simply lay down again while the shocks continued.

But what happened with dogs from the control group? When this group of dogs were put into the box (without having experienced the initial electric shock treatment), they quickly jumped over the partition to avoid being shocked.

This discrepancy in behavior occurred due to “learned helplessness,” which describes a psychological state of helplessness resulting from a prolonged period of setbacks. Consequently, when a child experiences feelings of self-defeat, they come to believe they cannot succeed however hard they try, and eventually give up on learning.

When children are in elementary school, their schoolwork is relatively easy, meaning that exerting effort generally translates into success. However, once they enter junior high, their assignments become more challenging. While a child might still be “trying,” consistently low grades will eventually lead them to believe they are “not good at studying” or “dumb,” thus causing them to give up on learning. Once a child has adopted this mindset, they may start to misbehave or act out in other ways. Much like Chiu in the previous section, they often give up trying altogether.

In reality, our reason for “trying” is rooted in a belief that our efforts will lead us to achieve. However, a child that experiences “learned helplessness” already feels a loss of control over their lives. They feel that no matter how much effort they put in, success is out of reach, and their efforts are unlikely to affect any outcomes. As such, learned helplessness often leads to depression and a complete loss of hope for the future.

What If My Child Is Already Showing Signs of “Learned Helplessness”?

I personally find the Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) approach useful, as it moves the focus away from “problems” toward “finding solutions”. A simple motto used with this approach is “Goals, exceptions, small steps”, which we will explore below:

1. Transform negative behavior into concrete, positive goals

Example 1: Criticizing your teen for “always losing their temper” does not help them understand what they need to work on. Instead, set a concrete, positive goal, such as: “I want you to be able to express what makes you angry” or “Please find some ways to calm yourself down when you are upset.”

Example 2: Instead of simply complaining that your teen “never does their homework”, “doesn’t pay attention in class”, or “isn’t interested in learning”, you could set clear, positive goals, such as: “I would like you to complete your homework independently” or “I would like you to listen more carefully in class.”

Note: Avoid setting goals that may seem too ambitious. For example, suppose your teen’s exam grades are currently ranked twentieth in their class. Setting a goal for them to move into the top ten might seem too challenging for them, potentially leading them to give up, rather than try harder.

2. Identify “exceptional events”:

“Exceptional events” refer to situations where a problem *could* have occurred but didn’t. For example, some children may exhibit behavior that is consistently problematic, but is still *less problematic at times*. Parents can start to observe when their child’s problem behavior is less frequent, less severe, or perhaps stops altogether; or when the problem gets resolved—even if only for a brief period. Viewing our teen’s behavior in this way *helps us to learn to focus on the “positives” rather than the “negatives”*.

Some parents complain about their teens being “negative about everything”, “glued to their phone all day”, or having a tendency to “lose control of their emotions”. However, in his book *Positive Focus*, Taiwanese psychologist Chen Chih-heng describes how every person’s behavior “fluctuates.” Someone who normally has a good appetite will have days when they don’t feel hungry; a teenager seemingly addicted to their smartphone will still sometimes put it down; and even a child who “hates reading” might flip through a book every now and again. Indeed, it is because people’s behavior tends to fluctuate that setbacks are inevitable. Where there is room for progress, there is also the possibility for setbacks.

Therefore, even when a child’s problematic behavior is pretty much constant, there will be times when it is less frequent or severe, and it is these moments that parents must remember to watch out for.

For example, a student who “always talks back to their teacher” may have a day where they leave the teacher alone. Another student who never does their homework” may, on occasion, decide to write part of it. A student who “talks non-stop through class” may one day find themselves paying attention to a lesson.

3. Find small steps your teen can take:

Whenever an “exceptional event” occurs, parents can ask: “How did you manage that?” or “How can you make that happen again?” Changes do not need to be monumental; on the contrary, one small change after another can lead to significant improvements.

Try discussing with your teen small steps they can take to reach their goal. For instance, if your teen wants to complete their homework independently, small steps could include “putting their phone away or setting it to ‘Do not disturb’”, or “checking their textbook and asking their parents for help with tricky questions”.

4. Strengthen your relationship with your teen:

Whenever I see a child do something well, I always ask them how they achieved it. Teenagers often respond with “I don’t know.” In such a scenario, try telling your teen: “It means a lot to see you making changes.” *Allow the parent-child relationship to become a source of motivation for your teen to make improvements.* For example, you could tell your teen: “The teacher told me he’s so pleased to see you making changes” or “I’m so touched you did that!” or “Your classmates were praising your volleyball skills. I’m really proud of you.”

We should learn to appreciate small improvements our children make and the positive actions they take, rather than taking these for granted. As well, change doesn't happen overnight. Your teen will not miraculously transform into the ideal image you have in your mind – such as instantly becoming an avid reader, or their grades suddenly jumping from 60% to 80%.

But what if your son's grades improved from 60% to 65%? Would you view that as progress? If your daughter struggles to sit at her desk for ten minutes a day, but one day spends twenty minutes studying, is that progress?

To me, this is all progress!

More often than not, we fail to notice small improvements such as these, because they are not obvious, causing us to overlook our child's accomplishments. However, in reality, *everyone desires their achievements to be seen*. Just as when you prepare a delicious meal – surely you hope to see your family enjoying it?

When you fail to notice your teen's small wins yet continually point out their weaknesses, do not be surprised if, over time, they become less motivated or simply give up altogether.

Strive to be your teen's cheerleader, helping magnify even the smallest improvements they make. In this way, you will gradually be able to overcome your teen's "learned helplessness" and help them rediscover their self-confidence.

When Your Teen Struggles with Homework: Collaborate with Teachers To Support Progress

Pu was originally referred to the school counseling office because homework was a constant struggle for her. Her teacher also expressed other concerns, such as the fact that Pu often arrived late to class and was constantly forgetting her parent-teacher communication book, personal belongings, and sick notes.

During our counseling sessions, Pu always took a good ten seconds to respond to my questions, reminding me of the slow-mannered Flash the Sloth from the movie *Zootopia*. Whenever I thought about Pu and Flash the Sloth, I couldn't help but chuckle to myself, thinking what a cute comparison it was. It was clear, however, that Bu's teacher did not share this sentiment.

Bu's parents, who ran a breadmaking factory, were too preoccupied with work to give Bu's studies much attention. Bu's teacher had requested a meeting with Bu's mother the week before I met Bu, but the meeting had proved awkward.

Bu's teacher told her mother: "Completing homework is a student's basic responsibility. I'm not pushing Pu to get high grades, but when she can't even handle her own homework, how will you be able to you trust her with your business in the future?"

"We're bakers!" Bu's mother replied. "As long as she can do basic arithmetic, that's enough. Education isn't a huge priority in our family. We're laborers."

When Bu's teacher asked if the mother could at least supervise Bu's homework, Bu's mother replied: "We've tried various cram school programs since first grade. But she writes so slowly that none of these were very useful. We're busy baking bread in the evenings, I simply don't have time to sort out her homework!"

The teacher continued: "Last week, our class made hotpot for lunch. Pu forgot to bring her ingredients, so I made sure the other classmates still involved her and shared their hotpots. But when she's always forgetting things, it really affects how her classmates treat her." I could tell from this exchange that Bu's teacher not only wanted Pu to improve, but that she was also a very caring teacher.

Bu's mother's stance was firmer: "You shouldn't have let her share the hotpot! If she went hungry for that one meal, she'd probably remember to bring her own things next time."

So why was Pu struggling to complete her homework? Pu had been diagnosed with dysgraphia, a learning disability that affects a person's writing skills. For Bu, writing was more like drawing. When it came to unfamiliar words in particular, Pu would attempt to draw them as a picture, rather than "write" them.

However, from our counseling sessions, I found that a bigger problem was the different ways in which Bu's teachers and parents viewed Bu's situation. *While Bu's parents and special education teacher attributed Bu's struggles with homework to her learning disability, Bu's homeroom teacher thought Pu was lazy and her parents irresponsible.*

Pu gradually became so stressed by problems at school that she started trying to avoid going to school altogether. She frequently complained of stomach aches, vomiting, and diarrhea, leading her to take almost two weeks off sick in one month alone.

Worried, her mother called to seek my advice, which in turn prompted me to wonder: "With so many adults concerned for Bu's welfare, how did her situation become so complicated?"

Due to her unhurried responses, difficulty expressing herself, messy desk, and incomplete homework, Pu was often told off by teachers and targeted by her classmates. Some classmates would deliberately bump into Pu after class or hide her belongings.

As Pu felt powerless, she became accustomed to this treatment and silently endured it.

"If she's being bullied, then why doesn't she tell me herself?" her homeroom teacher asked. "If she could just tell me, I can help her address it! For example, I once found chewing gum stuck to her back, so I disciplined the classmate responsible and made them apologize." I could see that, despite her frustration, Bu's homeroom teacher was genuinely concerned. She certainly complained a lot about Bu, but she still cared.

However, Pu could sense her homeroom teacher's irritation toward her, which meant she avoided seeking her teacher's help – or even handing in her sick notes. Pu accumulated a number of unauthorized absences as a result, leaving her homeroom teacher increasingly baffled as to why Pu could not handle even the simplest of tasks.