Their heartbreak is palpable, as the parents sitting across from you tell their story. “It’s a school night and we hear ‘I’m going out.’ We ask if homework is done and instantly, there’s this annoyance that we’re even asking. We hear muttering under their breath and they’re gone. We know calling, texting, or following them will just make things worse. We feel bewildered, frustrated, and distant from our own child. We lose sleep, afraid for their safety. They don’t want our help, and our interest in their lives barely gets a one-word answer!”

Most of us have heard a similar lament from parents — good, caring parents and from countless educators, too. What’s going on? Something feels off. Some have tried to reassure you that this is normal. But, is it? Youth seem to be losing their attachment to adults. How do we make sense of it?

Attachment is a powerful drive characterized by the pursuit and preservation of proximity, the purpose of which is to ensure the survival of our species. We are born very immature, not at all ready to be without the care and guidance of adults. Attachment provides a sort of external womb in which to grow up. Attachment of dependent children to their providing adults offers the necessary context for growing infants into viable adults. When we attach to someone, we seek contact and closeness, to be together, be like them and loyal to them. If they claim us as one of theirs, we reciprocate and soon they start to matter most. If all goes well, we open our hearts and everything within us. We take their side, want to make things work for them, please them, love them, and share our secrets.

Parents are usually a child’s formative and primary attachments. The child stays close, acquires our language and values, feels a part of our family, and relishes signs that they matter to us — are loved and invited to be close. Attached children feel safe in our company and follow our lead, and this relationship is a child’s best bet.

Part of this attachment drive is the orienting instinct. As with all mammals, we are preprogrammed to get our direction and orientation from somebody. These instincts are crucial for establishing the alpha-dependent “right relationship” between children and adults. Rearing children to adulthood encompasses
nurturing children to their full potential — to be the next generation of caregivers, workers, and problem solvers.

“The realization of human potential is primarily in the hands of parents, pure and simple. It always has been.”

This is as nature intended. What does it mean when we casually refer to an entire generation of youth, the millennials, as selfish, spoiled, lazy, immature, and shallow? What if it goes beyond this one age cohort? Gordon Neufeld asks, “Where has all the maturity gone, and why have so few noticed its lack?”

In the words of author and educator, Deborah MacNamara, “We’ve lost the ability to parent, teach, and guide youth, and many of them are not looking to us anymore.”

What happens when, instead of orienting to the adults responsible for them, youth orient to other youth? Without attracting mainstream attention, a troubling trend has been unfolding for over 50 years. As early as...
Scholars in 16 countries studied youth and confirmed that a children’s culture had been developing since shortly after the Second World War, and coincident with that, the rates of violence, bullying, youth crime, and delinquency had also escalated significantly.

The 1960s, Dr. James Coleman alerted us to an alarming change in our culture. In a study of 7,000 youth, he warned of a fundamental change in our society. For the first time in our evolution, youth had become more influential on the behaviour and values of fellow youth than parents. Attention was drawn to the phenomenon of “peer orientation” in 2004 when Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté published Hold On to Your Kids: why parents need to matter more than peers. Scholars in 16 countries studied youth and confirmed that a children’s culture had been developing since shortly after the Second World War, and coincident with that, the rates of violence, bullying, youth crime, and delinquency had also escalated significantly.

Contemporary research confirms that peer orientation presents a significant risk to future well-being. Is it time to take a closer look?

PEERS MAKE POOR PARENTS

In 2020, many stable, loving families with parents who care about their children are discovering their youth have shifted their orienting “north star” and instead of emerging into their potential, have become distant and no longer seem to care about family or societal priorities. They prioritize time with peers, adopt the language and habits of their peers, vehemently defend their peers, and seem to reserve their thoughtfulness, affection, and secrets for their peers. So commonplace, many of us haven’t
paid much attention, though what is common or normative is not always good. Peers, unlike parents or other caring adults, are ill-equipped and disinclined to provide the conditions that nurture development and maturation. Peer relationships that compete with closeness to parents, where there are explicit or implicit expectations of secrecy from parents and loyalty to peers, to insult or ignore expectations from parents or teachers, to instill a distrust of adult caregivers, are clearly problematic. Parents and teachers are unable to guide, influence, or collect their attention as they once could.

When youth lose faith in us as their caregivers, many take matters into their own hands, becoming bossy and trying to orchestrate their care. When youth assume the lead or alpha mode in relationships with adults, they are no longer in “right relationship” with us as our dependents, and they no longer look to us to lead the way. Alpha behaviour in a dependent youth feels “wrong” and caregiving adults find this behaviour anything but endearing. We mistakenly see their resolve, take-charge attitude, and tough veneer as strength and resilience. We describe them as mature and knowing their own minds, and we misunderstand these youth as confident. Sadly, their hardened feelings and bold opinions are quite the opposite.

HOPE FOR TURNING THE TIDE

The good news is that kids want to belong to us and be on good terms with the adults in their lives. We are creatures of relationship and attachment. To turn the tide, when and if youth have distanced from adults in their village, we as adults need to assume responsibility for the attachment needs of youth. It’s up to us to take the lead, foster relationship, and preserve what connection we regain. To win back the trust of the youth in our lives, we must be trustworthy, that is, we resolve to be agents of attachment even in the face of emotion and behaviour that falls short of our hopes. We cannot afford to value their performance more than their person. It’s up to us to create conditions where youth can rest and, thus, grow. For youth to safely feel their vulnerable feelings, adults must extend a big enough invitation to youth — one that includes room for the messiness of raw feelings.

Parents raised in this society that, for hundreds of years, has devalued emotion and feeling may find it challenging to welcome the vulnerable feelings that were expected to be suppressed in us. Compassion and grace will help. Our aim is to come alongside of our youth, to invite their dependence which, surprisingly, is the path to their emerging personhood and independence.

Those who study relationships have discovered a few essential foundations for preserving or inviting youth back into contact and closeness. One way to foster relationship is to “collect” them — to engage them with a smile, eye contact, and something simple we can agree on. Routine collecting just for the sake of relationship makes it clear that we as adults are interested in them. Especially important is the wisdom to “collect before you direct.” Culturally, we know and practise this — for example, with the usual greeting routine before we ask for something from a neighbour or business associate. This simple bit of
age-old wisdom engages our attachment instincts, and once engaged, we are more likely to want to please or agree with the other.

Making headway requires a plan to address foreseeable stumbling blocks. As creatures of attachment, we instinctively go into defensive self-protect mode if an issue feels too big to overcome or too much to bear. It’s our job to convey that, even when it’s stormy, it’s safe to depend on me. We are responsible to hold onto them when they cannot hold onto us.

When weathering storms — and we can expect storms — it is very helpful to employ bridging: drawing attention to the ways we remain connected even when something comes between us.\(^1\) As a parent, I used to throw my arms wide when faced with a big upset between myself and my children. I would say, “It’s a good thing love is huge” and the inferred but unspoken part of the message is that this issue, however big it may feel in this moment, is smaller than my love for you. When the moment is terrible, we can bridge to a few minutes from now: “I can see you need a bit of room, and I’ll come back to check on you in a bit.” Bridging essentially communicates that the relationship is going to survive the separation. This can prevent or minimize defensive shutting down when youth have a hard time holding onto the safe shelter of our attachment.

When building back connection, we work hard so they may rest in our care. We create an environment where their protective defenses can melt, where it starts to feel safe to care again, and where they could recover from wounds they may have suffered. It should go without saying that we would refrain from threats to withdraw our affection, or suggestions that they need to take care of us — for example: “I’ve had about enough of your behaviour” or “Do you know how much you hurt us with your antics?”

Even things they care about or depend on would be off limits to use against them, as we are working towards attachment rather than coercion to pull their behaviour into line.\(^1\) These practices only reinforce that it’s unsafe to care about anything or anyone or to rest in our care, as it sets them up. It is up to us to convey that we are up for the job of providing what they need, and that we are safe to attach to.

A ROLE FOR COUNSELLORS AND OTHER SUPPORTING ADULTS

Equipped with the insight that youth suffer outside of attachment with caring adults, our part is to play a supporting role in restoring relationship between youth and adults within their attachment village. Using Neufeld’s analogy of “the roots of attachment,”\(^1\) when a plant fails to thrive, we feed and water the roots. When a young person is suffering, we restore the attachments that can feed and shelter them, providing fertile ground in which
they can grow. Being able to see the problems youth face through the lens of attachment and development, we set our sights on creating the conditions for growth, maturation, and the unfolding of their potential.

For many disenfranchised youth, their attachment wounds have been deep and longstanding. Even these youth benefit from adults coming alongside of them, inviting them to rest in our care, if even just for a little while. Our role may be to restore their faith in adults as a source of care. We may also support them to build a village of caring adults around them. Whether or not safe family attachment is an option, adult relationship is key to their well-being, supporting youth to recover what feelings are possible to recover, and where possible, to grieve the losses and lacks in their lives. This would be the natural path to developing true resilience.

Creating a safe-enough, sustained context for youth to recover vulnerable feelings is not an option. Our role as a supporting adult may be to allow them to attach to us to the degree that fits our situation. Rather than attempting to force vulnerability where the context cannot support it, we offer a backup plan. We could matchmake the youth to safe adults who can help them learn the expectations of adulthood, a series of scripts for acceptable behaviour, so they can succeed in society until such time as they can afford the luxury of feeling their vulnerability and grieving the lacks and losses they have faced.

When youth and parents are amenable to restoring connection, guided by an understanding of what youth need to develop, a helpful place to start with parents is to help them see the youth as in need of them. Adults, like children, come with built-in caregiving and care-receiving instincts, the alpha and dependent instincts. Sometimes when a youth has appeared strong and independent, the parents may have misunderstood that their own alpha caregiving was not wanted or needed. Sometimes they have accepted this as “normal” and resigned themselves to early retirement from the job as parents. Restoring relationship may be primed by affirming the parents’ alpha caregiving instincts. For example: “I can hear how hard it’s been for you having your son pull away from you; and you have had a sense that he still needs you, and you’re right — he does.”

Our own compassion for both the intention to parent well (alpha intentions) and the vulnerability of the child (dependence) provides safety for recovering “right relationship” between parents and youth. Even when we don’t feel like we have the answers, as adult caregivers, we are the answer to youth.

Even when we don’t feel like we have the answers, as adult caregivers, we are the answer to youth.

Michele Maurer, RCC, RMFT, works in private practice in Langley and provides relationship counselling services to individuals, couples, and families. Michele is on faculty with the Neufeld Institute, where she facilitates online courses and consults with parents, educators, and helping professionals from an attachment-based developmental perspective. She offers workshops, courses, and advanced clinical training to clinicians across B.C. www.resiliencecft.com

REFERENCES

1 Neufeld, G. Power to Parent I: The Vital Connection course (Neufeld Institute, Vancouver, BC, 2014).