

Family Communication and Problem-Solving

Few parents are totally prepared for the onset of adolescence. The idea that your child doesn't want you to have all the answers anymore can be hard to accept. You understand that she doesn't need you to run her life or solve her problems, but you worry that she will make the wrong decisions, get mixed up with the wrong people, and throw her youth and talent away. Quarrels about family rules, household chores, personal habits, friends (yours and hers), the telephone, the TV, money, and a host of other large and small issues are all but inevitable. At times you will get on each other's nerves. Even an "easy" teenager will sometimes do things that seem foolish, thoughtless, and hurtful.

You can't avoid disagreements, but you can prevent them from damaging your relationship with the adolescent. Everyday hassles become major problems when family members talk *at* one another instead of communicating *with* one another, avoid or escalate conflict instead of working out constructive ways of resolving disagreements, and fail to get professional help when they need it. In this chapter I introduce techniques for improving communication and resolving conflict and tell you how to get professional help if the need arises.

Communication

All of us know instinctively that communication is an essential part of a healthy relationship. In our business and social lives, we try to be careful about what we say and how we say it. Within our families, however, we sometimes forget.

OBSTACLES TO COMMUNICATION

The first step toward establishing good communication within the family is reducing negatives. Without realizing it, parents sometimes speak to adolescents

in ways that are all but guaranteed to cut off communication. In his classic book *People Skills*, Robert Bolton calls these *roadblocks*. Some of the most common roadblocks to communication are:

- **Criticism and ridicule.** Negative evaluations of the listener are communication-killers. Labeling (“You jerk,” “When are you going to stop being such a whiner?” “Just like a teenager”), personal attacks (“The trouble with you is you’re lazy,” “You look ridiculous”), sarcasm (“That’s a great [meaning terrible] idea,” “Thanks a lot [for nothing]”), and put-downs (“When I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it,” “You’re acting like a child”) all fall into this category. Parents sometimes feel that if they do not criticize their child, their child will never learn. Criticism doesn’t make people want to change; it makes them defensive.
- **Giving too many orders or too much advice.** Commands (“Do it now!” “Turn that off!” “How many times have I told you not to do that?”), threats (“Do it now, or else!” “Don’t make me lose my temper,” “Wait till your father hears about this!”), and sermons (statements that begin with “You should” or “You should not”) are obvious turn-offs, especially to adolescents who are struggling for autonomy. So is unsolicited advice. When you tell adolescents, “If I were you, I’d do X, Y, or Z” or “What you should do is . . .,” you are communicating that they aren’t capable of solving their own problems.
- **Treating the adolescent’s problems lightly.** When parents attempt to reassure the adolescent (“Cheer up, things will look better tomorrow,” “Don’t worry, I’m sure it will all work out for the best”) or to divert him (“There’s no point dwelling on it,” “You think you have it tough? When I was your age . . .”), they may have the best of intentions, but the underlying message is that the adolescent’s worries are trivial.

Instead of promoting communication, put-downs, orders, and blithe reassurance trigger defensiveness, resistance, and resentment, and they undermine self-esteem. A good rule is to avoid saying things to your adolescent that you would not say to another adult.

SAYING WHAT YOU MEAN

It is surprising how often parents don't speak their minds. Especially when they are frustrated or angry, parents tend to read meaning into the adolescent's behavior rather than simply saying how they feel.

Saying how you feel (“*I* get frustrated/angry/upset when . . .”) is much more effective with adolescents than shaming and blaming (“*You* never think of anyone but yourself”). The first statement gives the adolescent the option of changing her behavior so that you won't feel that way again. Because you aren't imposing a solution, the adolescent is less likely to feel that going along with you is giving in. She can change her behavior without losing face. The second statement, in contrast, backs her into a corner where she has only two choices: knuckling under or fighting back. Saying how you feel also closes off rebuttals. The adolescent can argue with a statement about her motives and intentions: “*I do* care what you and Dad think.” But you are the expert on your feelings: She may think your reaction is crazy or illogical, but she cannot deny what you are feeling.

Psychologists call these *I-messages* and *you-messages*. *I-messages* are nonjudgmental statements of how we feel about a particular action or situation. *You-messages* are evaluations of the other person's motives, attitudes, or character.

There is a simple formula for *I-messages*: **When you** _____ [describe the behavior nonjudgmentally], **I feel** _____ [disclose your feelings], **because** _____ [clarify the effect of this behavior on your life].

In describing the behavior that bothers you, try to *be specific*: “When you leave your clothes on the floor” rather than a fuzzy “When your room is a total mess.” *Be objective* and avoid character attacks (“You're a slob”) and generalizations (“You always/constantly/never”). *Be brief*. If you say to your son, “I feel angry when you get so wrapped up in a football game that you forget about the family and come home late and all dirty,” it's hard for him to know what is making you angry. Are you saying that you don't want him to play football or that you don't want him to care so much about sports? That you don't want him to spend so much time with his friends or that you want the family to be more involved in the games? (What does “remember your family” mean?) That you object to his being late? Or that you wish he'd clean up before he comes to the table (which would make him later)? You're much more likely to get your message across if you stick to one issue at a time. With practice, you should be able to fit an *I-message* into one sentence.

I-MESSAGES VS. YOU-MESSAGES

Situation: The teenager talks on the phone for an hour.

You-message: "You never think of anyone but yourself."

I-message: "When you stay on the phone for an hour [behavior], I feel frustrated [feeling], because nobody else can get through [effect]."

Situation: The teenager makes a snack in the afternoon and does not clean up afterward.

You-message: "You never do anything around the house."

I-message: "When you don't clean up the kitchen after a snack [behavior], I get annoyed [feeling], because it makes extra work for me [effect]."

Situation: The teenager comes home an hour after curfew.

You-message: "You are trying to make me angry."

I-message: "When you don't come home by curfew [behavior], I get upset [feeling], because I lose sleep worrying that you might have had an accident [effect]."

In disclosing your feelings, try to use a word that accurately reflects your inner experience. *Angry* is stronger than *annoyed*; *upset* is different from *frustrated*; *worried* and *afraid* carry different messages. Parents tend to overuse *angry*. When the adolescent forgets to tell you that he is spending the night with a friend, your first reaction is likely to be fear. When your fear is relieved, you get angry because he caused you such a fright. The adolescent is more likely to see your point of view when you are able to communicate your first reaction: "I feel frightened when I don't know where you are."

In describing effects, be as concrete as you can. Focus on the way the adolescent's behavior cost you money, damaged your possessions, wasted your time, caused you extra work, or interfered with your activities. Adolescents are much more likely to change their behavior if they can *see* that something they did interfered with your legitimate rights.

Using a formula to communicate with your child might seem awkward at first. Indeed, the adolescent may well pick up on what you are doing and ask you to stop "talking like a psychologist." But if you persist, saying what you mean

will become more and more natural. Understanding in your family will increase, and fewer little issues will escalate into major battles.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Getting your message across is only one side of communication; the other side is listening. Adolescents sometimes say words to the effect that “My friends listen to me, but my parents only hear me talk.” Often they are right. Familiarity breeds inattention. Typically, family members are so convinced they know what another family member is going to say that they don’t bother to listen. They finish the speaker’s sentences, give an answer before they’ve heard the question, or just tune out. Sometimes they appear to be listening but actually are paying attention to something else (the television, the car in front of yours, the ball game). Other times they may hear what the person is saying but pay little attention to what the person is feeling. Listening is not a passive process but an active one. How can parents be better listeners with their adolescents?

- **Pay attention.** You can’t really listen to the adolescent if you’re cooking dinner, flipping through the newspaper, or washing the car at the same time. Genuine listening requires stopping other activities, tuning out other thoughts, giving the speaker your full attention, and showing that you are interested. Put the paper down, lean forward, establish eye contact, and use nods and brief phrases (“Mmm-hmmm,” “Really?” “Then what happened?” “I see,” “I hear you,” “Oh, how awful!”) to let the adolescent know you are with him. If you can’t really listen now, suggest another time when you can: “I want to hear about it, but I’m in a rush. Can we talk after dinner?”
- **Listen with your eyes and your ears.** Words tell only half the story. To learn how the adolescent feels about what he is saying and what he is letting slip between the lines, you have to pay attention to body language. The adolescent may say he doesn’t care, but his downcast eyes and slumped posture tell you otherwise. When you get different messages from his words and his body language, believe the body language.
- **Don’t interrupt with questions and comments.** Like adults, adolescents need to sound off. When they are angry or upset, they don’t want advice, they want understanding. Don’t jump in when you think you get the gist of what your child is saying. Let her speak her piece. When she pauses, let her know you

are still there, but try to hold your tongue. Most of us are uncomfortable with silence; we feel a compulsive need to keep the conversation going. But attentive silence allows the speaker to collect her thoughts. It can nudge the adolescent to go deeper into herself and follow up her expression of what she thinks she should feel with what she really feels.

- **Don't react defensively if your teenager says something critical about you.** We all find it hard to keep our mouth shut when we are being criticized—whether or not the criticism is justified. If your adolescent is criticizing you or your behavior toward him, listen attentively before responding.
- **Rephrase the adolescent's comments in your own words.** Your first response to your adolescent should be to briefly rephrase what he said in your own words. "It sounds like you're not sure whether to try out for the play." "You're angry at Sam because he left you out." "So now you're confused." Psychologists call this *reflective listening*. Rephrasing the adolescent's message serves three purposes: It allows you to check on whether you understand your child correctly; it tells him that you are paying attention and trying to understand; and it allows him to "rehear" what he has communicated.

The goal of active listening is to understand another person's point of view, to see things through that person's eyes, to walk a mile in his shoes, and to share his feelings. This doesn't mean that you and your adolescent will always agree. You won't. But when family members stop assuming and start listening, the climate for communication in your home will improve.

"BUT MY TEENAGER WON'T TALK TO ME"

One common complaint among parents is that their child stops talking to them during adolescence. Adolescents do have a greater need for privacy than small children do. Having thoughts and feelings of their own is part of becoming independent. There are times when they don't want to talk about it because they want to work it out for themselves, whatever "it" may be. But other times the adolescent's silence is a sign that the wires of communication in your family are somehow crossed. What can you do?

Listen to what you say and how you say it. Your adolescent comes home from school looking blue. How do you respond? Are you critical ("What did you do this time?")? Do you offer empty reassurances ("This time next week

you won't even remember what happened today")? Are you too quick to give advice ("Moping around won't help; why don't you go for a run?")? All of these responses close the door to communication. They make it sound as if you think you have all the answers without knowing the questions.

You can open the door by commenting on the adolescent's body language ("Looks like you had a bad day" or "Your face is beaming") and inviting her to tell you more ("Want to talk about it?" "I'd like to hear about it," or "What's on your mind?"). Use eye contact and an involved posture to show that you are interested, and silence to give her time to decide whether she wants to talk or not. If she seems to be hesitant—doesn't speak up, but doesn't leave the room either—let her know you understand her ambivalence: "It must be pretty hard to talk about." If her response to your invitation of "Feel like talking?" is "Not really," don't push ("You know you can always talk to me," "It's better to get it off your chest," and the like). The adolescent has a right to keep her thoughts and her problems to herself. Compelling her to talk is an invasion of privacy, a denial of her individuality and separateness. Let her know you're there if she wants you. If you are just beginning to work on communication skills, it will take some time to build mutual trust.

In some families, the problem is not that family members don't trust one another to listen, but that they are all so busy there is hardly ever time for a good heart-to-heart talk. If this is the case in your family, you need to create times when you are available. Breakfast if you are all early risers, the dinner hour for issues that concern the whole family, and bedtime are obvious choices. The fact that your adolescent is growing up doesn't mean he won't appreciate your stopping by his room to see how things are going before lights-out. But be sure to knock first.

Resolving Conflicts

Conflict is part of life. It's impossible for people to live or work together without ever experiencing differences in values, opinions, desires, needs, and habits. Everyone is aware of the negative aspects of conflict, but we tend to forget the positive ones. Conflict prods us into expressing, rather than suppressing, our feelings. It shocks us out of our passivity, forcing us to think about what we have taken for granted, to change our customary ways of doing things, and to invent solutions to our problems. To go through life avoiding conflict is to confine

oneself to superficial relationships and stagnation. Conflict is, in Robert Bolton's words, "a dangerous opportunity."

Conflict occurs when:

- One family member feels that others are threatening his or her values, perceptions, lifestyle, sense of fairness, or "territory."
- Family members agree on the final goal but disagree on how to get there.
- There is not enough of something to go around. The "something" may be tangible (money, space, access to the computer) or intangible (time, attention, affection).
- Communication among family members has broken down.

For one or more of these reasons, you have reached an impasse. Unless you get beyond that impasse, hostility and resentment are likely to build, and nit-picking, teasing, criticism, yelling, avoidance of one another, and stony silences will increase.

Conflict can improve and invigorate family relationships by helping family members to understand one another better and to be more tolerant of their individual differences, leading them to clarify issues and ideas in a way that clears the air, and forcing them to redefine their goals or set new goals that are more satisfactory to everyone. When conflicts are resolved in a positive way, everyone wins.

Conflict harms family relationships when it takes the form of personality attacks and power struggles. Negative conflict leads to resentment and hostility; causes confusion, insecurity, and diminished self-esteem; and makes productive, rational discussion of issues and behavior in the future difficult, if not impossible. When family members are at war, nobody wins. Your goal as a parent should be to resolve conflicts in a positive way, not to avoid or control them. Before you reject as wishful thinking the idea that conflicts can be useful, read what psychologists have learned from studying conflict in all kinds of settings, including families.

NO-WIN SOLUTIONS

The most common ways parents attempt to resolve conflicts with their adolescents are cracking down, giving in, avoiding the problem, and compromise. Although each of these strategies has its uses, each also has drawbacks. There is

an alternative: collaboration, which I will discuss shortly. First let's look at the others.

One way to end an argument with an adolescent is to crack down. Like a military officer pulling rank, parents lay down the law. When parents refuse to consider the adolescent's needs and desires and/or refuse to let her participate in the decision-making process, she is not going to be highly motivated to make the solution work. To the contrary, domination fosters resentment. It should be used only in emergencies, when quick, decisive action is vital (and when parents do know best).

A second way to end conflict is to give in to the adolescent's wishes. Giving in or accommodation is appropriate when parents realize that the adolescent was right and they were wrong: It shows the adolescent that they are willing to listen and to learn, and that they are reasonable. Accommodation is also appropriate when the issue is trivial to the parents but not to the adolescent (for example, how your son dresses for a party with his friends). But it shouldn't become a habit. As one psychologist noted, "If you want to hate your child, just let him win all the time. That's a sure formula."

Avoidance is also common: Parents do everything they can to escape a confrontation with the adolescent. When a problem comes up, they change the subject, suggest the family member is making mountains out of molehills, or simply withdraw. Avoidance is useful when the issue is trivial (the adolescent forgot a minor chore), when parties to a conflict are under too much stress to deal with the issue now (the adolescent has an exam the next day), or when they simply need time to cool down. But avoidance doesn't heal wounds; it allows them to fester.

The fourth strategy is compromise: Parents and the adolescent meet each other halfway. Most of us were taught that compromise is the best solution to conflict. This is only partly true. Compromise is useful when the issue is not worth much time and effort (where to eat dinner tonight). It's also useful when time pressures force a quick solution (for example, when you're expecting a long-distance call, the adolescent needs to call a friend, and you compromise by limiting his call to five minutes). But compromise is not a lasting solution to serious differences. Neither party's needs are fully met: Both settle for less than they want.

The problem with all these responses is that they don't resolve the conflict. The issue is left up in the air, and needs and feelings are pushed under the rug. Moreover, with each of these strategies somebody loses. With cracking down, it's the adolescent; with giving in, it's the parent; with avoidance, it's both. Although

compromise is preferable to the other three, both parties give up something. There is an alternative to these no-win approaches.

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

The goal of collaborative problem-solving is to find a win-win solution that satisfies everyone. This approach takes more time and energy than the others I have described. It requires the unhappy family members to confront one another, which isn't always pleasant. But in most cases it minimizes hostility and hurt feelings and maximizes the chances that you will truly resolve the issue.

There are six basic steps to collaborative problem-solving. Again, using a formula may seem awkward at first, but after you've done it several times it will begin to seem more natural. This approach works best if you choose a time and place when both you and the adolescent will not be distracted, limit the discussion to a specific issue, and secure in advance the adolescent's agreement to try to work out a solution.

- **Step 1: Establish ground rules.** The ground rules for conflict resolution are essentially the rules of a fair fight. Each party agrees to treat the other party with respect—no name-calling, sarcasm, or put-downs—and to listen to the other person's point of view. Parents can set the stage by stating at the beginning their desire to be fair. Let's use the most frequent cause of conflict between parents and adolescents, the state of the adolescent's room.

Mother: Hannah, we're arguing a lot about your room. I'd like to sit down and see if we can come up with a solution that both of us consider fair. Is this a good time to talk?

Hannah: Yeah, I guess so.

Mother: I want you to understand how I feel about this, but I also want to understand how *you* feel.

Hannah: Sure you do.

Mother: No sarcasm, okay? We're trying to solve this together.

Hannah: Okay.

- **Step 2: Reach mutual understanding.** The next step is to take turns being understood. This means that each of you will have the opportunity to say what you

think the real problem is and how you feel about it. It's important that you get it off your chest. But it's also important to avoid loaded words and phrases, accusations, and evaluations, and to focus on the issue, not on personalities. Each of you also has the right to be understood. This is where reflective listening comes in. When you've described the problem as you see it, let the adolescent speak her piece. Then rephrase the adolescent's point of view and ask her to restate yours, so that you are sure you understand one another.

Mother: The way you leave your room really bothers me, because I can't get in there to vacuum and dust and it looks so sloppy. Besides, things are always getting lost.

Hannah: That's not fair. How do you know things "always" get lost?

Mother: You're right, but I worry things will be misplaced. You were late the other morning because you couldn't find your blue sweater.

Hannah: I suppose you never lose anything?

Mother: Well, you've got me there. Now tell me how you feel.

Hannah: I don't think my room is all that bad. I know where most of my stuff is, and I don't see the point of cleaning up all the time. I get so tired of you nagging me about it.

Mother: Let me make sure I understand. You don't think your room is that messy, you know where to find things, and you don't like me telling you to clean up all the time.

Hannah: Right.

Mother: And how do I feel about it?

Hannah: You think my room is a disaster area, you can't clean up, and things get lost.

Mother: Yes, that's how I see it.

- **Step 3: Brainstorm.** The next step is for each of you to think of as many solutions to the problem as you can. The goal of brainstorming is quantity, not quality. At this stage, no idea should be rejected because it's crazy, it's too expensive, or one of you thinks it is dumb. Zany ideas can reduce tension and keep creative juices flowing. Set a time limit (five minutes should be enough) and write down everything you can think of. A list of solutions to the messy room problem might include:

Hannah's mother will stop bugging her about her room.

Hannah will put her dirty clothes in the laundry hamper every night and make her bed every morning.

Hannah will clean the room, but only when company is coming.

Hannah will close the door when company comes.

Hannah's mother will limit room checks to once a week.

Hannah will move to an apartment over the garage.

Hannah and her dad will build a wall-size storage unit so she has someplace to put all her stuff.

Hannah's mom will clear some space in the hall closet for things Hannah doesn't use that often (such as sports gear and off-season clothes).

The family will hire a housekeeper.

Hannah will straighten, vacuum, and dust her own room.

- **Step 4: Agree to one or more solutions.** The best way to go about this is for each of you to select the options you like best. (Don't discuss each and every option; this can lead to endless, often fruitless, debate.) Then see where your interests coincide. Have you chosen any of the same options? Some give-and-take, or negotiation, will be necessary at this stage (Hannah's mother may agree to stop nagging if Hannah picks up her clothes and makes the bed daily). And you need to think through the practical considerations (the family can't afford a housekeeper). But neither of you should agree to something you still find unacceptable.
- **Step 5: Write down your agreement.** This may sound excessively formal, but memory can be faulty. If either of you thinks the other has broken the agreement, you can refer to your contract. Make sure that the contract includes both what the adolescent is expected to do and what you are expected to do.

Hannah will put her laundry in the hamper and make her bed each morning, straighten up once a week (not every day), and put clean clothes away promptly (the same day her mother does the laundry).

Mom will stop bugging Hannah about her room; clean once a week, after Hannah straightens; not put things away for Hannah without asking her first; and give Hannah two shelves in the hall closet.

- **Step 6: Set a time for a follow-up discussion to evaluate your progress.** This is as important as the first five steps. One of you might not live up to the agreement, or the solution might not be as practical as you thought, and you will have to work out the bugs.

This six-step formula can be applied to a variety of situations, from arguments over the adolescent's curfew to decisions about family vacations. In some cases you won't be able to reach an agreement. When it comes to health and safety, you may have to make a unilateral decision. But adolescents are far more likely to go along with you when they participate in the decision-making process and when they see that you are taking their needs and desires seriously.

Getting Professional Help

There are times when families cannot solve their problems by themselves and need professional help. Unfortunately, some people still view "seeing a shrink" as a sign that they have failed as parents. Going to a physician when your child has a persistent headache or a high fever isn't a blot on your character. What would your neighbors (and your mother-in-law) think if you ignored these symptoms? Seeking professional attention for chronic or acute behavioral or emotional problems is no different. Knowing when a problem is beyond your capabilities is part of being a good parent. (It might help to know that you are not alone: In any given year, about 30 million American adults and 7 million teenagers receive professional therapy or counseling.) Other parents put off getting help because they don't know where to turn, a situation I hope to remedy.

WHEN TO LOOK FOR HELP

Here are some common reasons why families with adolescents seek counseling.

- The adolescent is suffering from a severe disorder, such as depression, anorexia, drug addiction, or school phobia. Parents cannot—and should not try to—treat these problems themselves. Throughout this book I will alert you to the warning signs that a young person needs professional attention.
- You know the adolescent has a problem, but you don't know what it is. An example would be a young person who is withdrawn socially and doesn't

seem to have any friends. This might be due to extreme shyness, depression, stress at school, involvement with drugs, or any number of other causes. If you don't know what the problem is, how can you help? A professional can make specific diagnoses and recommendations.

- You have tried to solve the problem without success. Frequent truancy, chronic running away, or opposition to any and all authority are examples of such problems. Wise parents seek help *before* the adolescent gets into serious trouble with the authorities.
- You realize that you are part of the problem. Constant, bitter fighting among family members is a good example. It is extremely rare for one person to be the cause of chronic dissension in the family. As the saying goes, it takes two to fight. A third party—the therapist—can help you see why you are fighting and how to stop.
- When the family is under a lot of stress (for example, because of a death or serious illness in the family or because the parents are in the midst of a divorce) and one or more family members are not coping well (for example, depressed or drinking heavily). Therapists are trained to help individuals cope with short-term crises in healthy ways.

Recognizing that your family needs help is an important step. What then?

FINDING THE RIGHT THERAPIST

How do you find the right therapist for your problem? Start with people whom you know and trust and who know you and your family well. If someone you are close to has been in therapy, ask whether he or she would recommend that therapist. Even if the therapist is not right for you, he or she may be able to make an appropriate referral. A friend who works in mental health, your family physician, your minister, or a school counselor are also good sources. These professionals will have had experience with a number of therapists and will be able to identify two or three who might work well with you. Community mental health centers and agencies are also good resources. The major professional organizations of psychologists (www.apa.org), psychiatrists (www.psych.org), marriage and family therapists (www.aamft.org), and social workers (www.socialworkers.org) also are good sources of information and referrals.

Changes in health insurance practices have meant both good and bad news

for individuals seeking psychological counseling. The good news is that more individuals have insurance coverage for mental health services than was the case in the past. The bad news, though, is that many times your insurance dictates where and from whom you are able to receive therapy. Many of the therapists in your insurance company's referral network probably are well qualified. As with any type of health care practitioner, though, merely being an approved provider of counseling services for a particular insurance company is no guarantee of a therapist's quality or expertise, and it is important to select a counselor who has extensive experience in working with teenagers and/or their families (see below). If you decide you want to see a therapist, you should check your policy to see how much leeway you have in selecting one. If you have very little room for personal choice, you might think about whether (and how much) your family can afford to pay out of pocket to see an expert who comes highly recommended. In most cases, it is worth the cost.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR Before you commit yourself to treatment, you should interview the therapist to determine, first, whether the person is qualified to handle your problem and, second, whether you feel comfortable with him or her. Some therapists will answer your initial questions by phone. Others will request an appointment. This doesn't mean they are evading you: Many therapists feel they can only evaluate your needs and their ability to work with you in a face-to-face meeting. Whether by phone or in person, your questions should include the following:

- Are you licensed?
- What are your educational training and background?
- What type of therapy do you offer or prefer? (What are the therapist's theories? How does he or she work with clients?)
- Do you have any expertise in working with adolescents? With families?
- How do you view the parent's role in the treatment?
- Do you have experience with this particular problem?
- How will I know the treatment is working?
- How often do you see clients (how many sessions per week) and how long do sessions last?
- When do you see clients? (Can the therapist accommodate your schedule?)

- What will treatment cost? (Most therapists charge a per session fee, so the cost will depend in part on the length of treatment.)
- Will some or all of the cost be covered by my health insurance? (Have the information with you.)

Ideally, you should talk to two or three therapists before making a decision. Their answers to your questions, and the questions they ask you, will give you a better sense of the differences in approach and personality among therapists and who makes you feel comfortable. If your personal inquiries have produced only one name, you should not be embarrassed to ask this therapist for the names of others who might be able to help you.

WHAT TO AVOID Every profession has its share of charlatans and quacks, and the field of mental health is no exception. Some warning signs:

- The therapist makes a quick diagnosis without asking for much information from you. (No therapist can make a diagnosis over the phone; at most, the therapist might tell you to seek immediate help.)
- The therapist offers a quick or guaranteed solution to your problem.
- The therapist seems uncomfortable with questions about his or her educational background, experience, and license.
- The therapist is vague or noncommittal about fees.
- The therapist says he or she has the answer and turns down your request for additional referrals.
- The first interview includes intimate questions about sex or other matters not related to your problem.
- The therapist has an ad in the Yellow Pages or on the Internet that makes extravagant claims. (Professional ethics limit advertising to a listing of name, degree, credentials, specialization, address, and telephone number.)

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THERAPY

- **How do I know whether I, my adolescent, or my family needs help?** There is no simple answer to this question. Everyone feels blue, indecisive, discouraged, out of control, and dissatisfied with their family life from time to time, including

adolescents. And all families go through spells when no one seems to be getting along. Usually these feelings and quarrels pass. If they persist, the emotional pain is acute, or the fights are getting out of hand, it might be time to seek help. (I will point out warning signs at many points in this book.) The basic rule is, When in doubt, speak to someone.

- **Is what I say to my therapist confidential?** Yes, except in two situations: when the therapist suspects that a child is being abused, physically or sexually, and when the therapist learns that someone's life is in danger (either the client or someone the client wishes harm). In these cases the therapist has a moral and legal obligation to notify appropriate authorities. Otherwise, professional ethics dictate that anything you say is strictly confidential.

Parents should know that *confidentiality applies to adolescents as well as to adults*. If your son is seeing a therapist, either individually or as part of family therapy, the therapist will not divulge anything about his private sessions to you without his consent. Many parents find this hard to accept, but it is important that the adolescent be able to trust the therapist completely. If something comes up that the therapist thinks you should know, he or she will work out a way with the adolescent to tell you.

- **What if the therapist recommends family therapy, but one family member will not cooperate?** While it is desirable for everyone in the family to be motivated to participate in family therapy, it isn't necessary in order for the treatment to be effective. In most cases, uninterested parties later decide to come along, if only because they worry about what is being said in their absence. If you feel your family needs help and you've found someone you would like to see, make an appointment and invite everyone involved to come. If the most important actor in your family problem isn't willing or interested, go anyway. The therapist has encountered this situation many times before and will help you decide how best to deal with it.