

The Emotional Lives of Teenagers with Lisa Damour

Lisa Damour: [00:00:00]

What we know from the research is that teenagers care what parents think. They care what their parents think, and when adults maintain open lines of communication and articulate their values, and offer themselves as partners and safety and What we know is it actually has a meaningful impact on adolescent behavior That was Lisa Damour on psychologists off the clock.

Yael Schonbrun: We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile high Denver, Colorado, author of Act Daily Journal, the Act Daily Card Deck, and the upcoming book Act for Burnout.

Yael Schonbrun: I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill [00:01:00] Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, the big book of Act metaphors and the Upcoming Imposter. No more.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Jill Stoddard: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

Debbie Sorensen: Hi, this is Debbie and I'm here today with Yael. We are introducing an interview that I did with Lisa Damour and it was such a delight to talk to Lisa Damour because she is a leading voice in adolescence. Actually, it's funny because not too long ago I was, I had.

NPR on my clock radio because I don't like to have a phone. I don't like to use my phone for a little alarm clock. I have NPR and I hear this conversation about teenagers and adolescents and I was like, that's Lisa Damour. She's just, her voice is everywhere. She has three terrific books. And it was pretty cool for me cuz I got to consult with her about some of my concerns about adolescents and ask my friends to ask her questions.

Um, so what an honor to have her on.

Yael Schonbrun: I was really excited to sneak a question in there too, because [00:02:00] I, first of all am a huge fan of Lisa Damour and love her writing and her wisdom, and I am also the parent of a newly minted teenager. As of just a couple days ago, my oldest turned 13, so for me it was really fun to get to pick the brain of this expert in this area, but.

One thing I do wanna say, and I, this is part of why I love Lisa's work so much, is that. I absolutely worship my 13 year old, and there's so much conversation about how tough teens are and how difficult they are. And I may eat my words at some point, but I, you know, my kid is, you know, plenty annoying, but he's also so wonderful and I love that she.

Makes teenagers feel much more friendly and accessible and really reduces the anxiety that we as parents can have because there is so much unhelpful mythology around what it means to have a teenager. And, and again, I just think the way that she approaches this developmental [00:03:00] phase is just so much more helpful than, than the fear mongering that can otherwise happen.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, she kind of takes some of the things that people are afraid of with adolescents and teenagers and helps you understand it and then have some ideas of, okay, this might be a helpful way to respond to this. And of course not at all. Teenagers are the same, so you may or may not see specific behaviors, but I think it really helps.

To be like, okay, I see what's going on here. Because sometimes, you know, as parents, we, or just anyone interacting with a teenager, we don't know what to do with these creatures and might feel a little confused by them. Um, but in some ways, you know, if you think of it as that tra transition from childhood where there's a lot of dependency and then by the end of adolescence, You know, they're on their own.

I talked to Louise Hayes about this on a previous episode. How much change happens just during those teenage years. It's like, wow. No wonder, you know,

there's a lot going on developmentally during those years because there's just so much happening.[00:04:00]

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, and, and because our kids are going through so much transition and change, it means that we as parents have to go through a lot of transition and change, and so having this guidance. From her, you know, that is really science based and thoughtful and nuanced is just so helpful because along with our kids, you know, we, you know, if our kids are changing by that very nature, we need to change two, right?

And how we approach them, interact with them, what we expect from them. And again, one of the things I really love about this is that there is a lot of nuance. Like one of the examples that she gives later on in the interview is about. This specific, uh, worry that a lot of parents have about their kids on, on screens, on video games or, or whatever other kinds of screens.

And I love that she sort of gives permission like just as an adult at the end of a long, exhausting day, might want a way to sort of decompress and turn off our kids do too. And that it's not a problem per se for them to be on a screen. It's more the way that we use those. Decompressing tools, and if we use them rigidly and [00:05:00] excessively, that's a problem.

But if we use them to kind of decompress and then we're able to sort of go back and be productive or do whatever else needs to be done, that it's actually a very productive tool. And I, I love that nuance that she introduces to it.

Debbie Sorensen: That was helpful for me with my mom guilt when at the end of the day I'm trying to finish my work and I give my kids permission. They're home from school, they're exhausted. I let them, you know, watch something on their iPad or something like that, and I feel a little guilty, but it's like they really are kind of, you know, school days are long and exhausting, so they need to unwind a little bit.

So now I feel less guilt, so that's good.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Yeah. Oh, I do too. Like, and, and we talk about it as, as a family, like, okay, you've had a hard day. Would it be helpful? You know, would, would it be restful for you to have a little screen time? And they'll say, yes. And we have a rule in my house that is, you know, we can use the screens and then when it's time for dinner, as long as you can get off of them, then there's no issue.

Right? You can use it tomorrow and the day after. But that, it's all about building the flexibility. That is the goal that we, as long as we can use it flexibly, then we're not gonna [00:06:00] worry too much about it.

Debbie Sorensen: and one of the things that I was able to ask her about that you'll hear toward the end of the episode are two patterns that you sometimes see with teenagers. One is when they're sort of underachieving or disengaging with school.

You know, maybe it's a bright kid who's always done, who's always engaged with schoolwork, who suddenly just. Wants nothing to do with school, refuses to do homework skips class or whatever the case may be. Um, and then on the other side are kids who are sort of, or I should say are teenagers or adolescents who are sort of overly overachieving, who are really stressed all the time and anxious.

When we think about the underachieving end of the spectrum, I wanted to point out to listeners who might be interested in this topic that this is something that we've covered. Actually, we've sort of covered both of these topics in the podcast in the past. We'll link to some episodes and one that came to mind was.

A book called The Self-Driven Child that, and this was several years [00:07:00] ago that we had this interview on the podcast, which is really about, you know, if your kid, if you feel like you're constantly battling, if you're constantly battling with your kid or teenager to engage with schoolwork and they're just refusing to, you know, how do you get them to be sort of self-motivated, en engaged?

Um, so we'll link to that on the. Show notes for today's episode for anyone who's interested. Um, and I also wanted to just say a little bit, and I don't know if you have any thoughts about either of these ya, but um, She talks about, you know, with the kids who are almost like overly ambitious, overly stressed out, who are taking on everything under the sun and then are stressed out and anxious all the time.

And it's concerning I think sometimes from a mental health standpoint when when kids are going that direction and she talks about this skill of. We, if you have a kid like that, they know how to work hard, right? But the skill that they might need your help with is how to know when to not work. When to say, [00:08:00] this isn't important to me.

I'm not gonna spend my time on it. Or maybe, oh, you know, I'm gonna take an easier class instead of this really hard one. Or, I'm gonna get a less than perfect grade on this so that I can have time to do this other thing That's important to me. And I was so struck by that because I work with. Adults with stress and burnout and anxiety and that skill is hard for so many of it, and I had never really thought about it that way before.

I read her work and talked to her about how that is as important as teaching them the academic piece and teaching them the hard work piece. It's teaching them that distinction.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, teaching them that distinction and teaching them how to kind of tune into their own cues, like, how tired am I? How important is this to me? Versus, you know, how important is it to other people? And I'm just sort of following along with the, the herd mentality. And what I think is so important to think about in the teen years is that it's sort of the breeding ground for adulting skills and that this is really an opportunity for us as [00:09:00] parents, as, as.

As guides who hopefully have developed some of these skills, but but also recognizing that most of us, For most of us, we are, we are still working on some of these seals too, but to recognize that the teen years are really a time and a place to start to learn some of these practices of figuring out what's working for me.

Am I too tired? Am I taking on too much? Am I not taking on enough? How do I know what are my cues? And to make that a part of helping your kid learn how to make decisions for themselves. So not. Taking the decision away from them, but sort of pointing out to them that this is an opportunity for them to try to kind of tune in and make some of those decisions that are gonna be healthy and sustainable and practices that they can take with them into adulthood.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, so take a listen to this episode where we talk about these kind of topics and so many more, and get some of the wisdom and practical advice from Dr. Lisa Damour. If you [00:10:00] pay attention to adolescent mental health, you've probably heard of my guest today. Dr. Lisa Damour is the author of three New York Times bestsellers, *Untangled Under Pressure*, and her new book, *The Emotional Lives of Teenagers*. She co-hosts the *Ask Lisa* podcast.

Works in collaboration with UNICEF and is recognized as a thought leader by the American Psychological Association. Dr. Damour graduated with honors

from Yale University and earned her doctorate in clinical psychology at the University of Michigan. Dr. Damour serves as a senior advisor to the Schubert Center for Child Studies at Case Western Reserve University and has written numerous academic papers, chapters and books related to education and child development. She maintains a clinical practice and also speaks to school's, professional organizations, and corporate groups around the world on the topics of child and adolescent development, family mental health, and adult wellbeing.

She also has the lived experience. She and her husband are the proud parents of two daughters. [00:11:00] Welcome, Lisa. Thank you so much for being here.

Lisa Damour: Thank you so much for having me.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, I'm a big fan of your work, um, and I, I wanna kind of, I'm trying to decide which questions does I ask you because I have so many, and I have all these friends who have either teenagers or tweens, and I asked them for questions, and I got almost like inundated. Your brain on their particular problem. So I'm gonna do my best to, best to hit some of the highlights from your work. Um, starting with this, you know, teenagers, I think sometimes almost scare people a little bit when you see a group of teenagers, or even if you're a parent and you're approaching the teenage years or, or in the middle of them.

Um, because there's so many changes and so much going on with adolescents, and so I'm wondering if you could tell us, you know, where do you think teenagers get this kind of reputation, and do you think they deserve it?

Lisa Damour: Well, I agree with you that people can be very anxious around teenagers. Um, I also think there's sort of a [00:12:00] bias often against teenagers, and in terms of the, where the reputation comes from, I think there's a few things. One is, um, teenagers are extraordinarily perceptive. They. I think it is much harder to pull a wool over the eyes of a teenager than it is of a child or an adult.

Teenagers have a very strong gut sense and awareness of things, and I think that, um, they can have an almost kind of x-ray vision quality that I think can make adults uneasy. Um, teenagers very quickly have the number of adults and, and, and I think that not all adults think that's great. So I think there's that issue.

Um, I also think. That there's a, there's a, a way in which humans are inclined toward prejudice. I think they, it's just a very, um, natural, if unappealing aspect of what it means to be human. [00:13:00] And I think in civilized society we work very hard against. prejudices, you know, we work very hard not to hold biases based and rightly so.

Work hard at this not to hold biases based on race, religion, skin color, ethnicity, but I think you can still be cranky about teenagers and get away with it. And if we think about the mechanism, one of the mechanisms that we think fuels bias and prejudice, it's this idea of, um, projecting unwanted aspects of oneself onto a group that looks different enough that one can say, see, it's them, not me, and then accusing them of those things.

So what I mean is I think that it may sometimes be the case that adults who are uneasy with their own intense emotions or. Interest in, you know, [00:14:00] sexuality or aggressive wishes or wishes to engage in risky behavior. They may feel uncomfortable with those things themselves. May say, you know, teenagers, so they are so like, you know, Sex crazed and aggressive and you know, impulsive and, oh, I can't stand this about them.

And it's sort of a way of saying, see, that's them not me. And the way that we know it's them, not me, is, see, I'm a middle-aged person and they're a teenager, so clearly we are different. So clearly this belongs to them. So I think there aren't a lot of socially acceptable biases against groups and yet adolescents.

Continue to be a group that in polite society, we can still be wholesale prejudiced against.

Debbie Sorensen: Hmm. That's a really good point, and I think that you're right. People don't really bat an eyelash when you say these kinds of comments about

Lisa Damour: Oh yeah. Oh, those crazy teenagers or you know, [00:15:00] teenagers or whatever. I mean, you can't say that about any other group, nor should you.

Debbie Sorensen: yeah. And I have two girls and, and they're kind of getting, they're approaching. I, I would say that one has probably started adolescents. They're approaching their teenage years. And I know you have two daughters yourself, and people sometimes say like, oh, the teen, you know, almost as if it's gonna be this terrible period of time.

And that's where I get a little bit like, oh, I hope it's not as bad as they're telling me it's going to be. I don't think it will be, but you know, it's a little scary when you hear people say that kind of comment,

Lisa Damour: It is, and the opening I, I have this in com committed to memory. The opening sentence of untangled is we need a new way to talk about teenage girls because the way we do it now is not fair to girls or helpful to their parents.

Debbie Sorensen: right? Yes. Absolutely. And I'm hoping to ask you a little bit more about that in the interview too, um, as we go. Um, one of the things about teenagers that I think sometimes. Well, it's, it's the topic of your new [00:16:00] book, the Emotional Life of Teenagers. And also it's one of the things that I think contributes to this feeling is their, you know, their emotions and how sometimes their emotions can be strong.

I think they're going through some changes in terms of their emotional development. Um, so I was wondering, you know, is that, is that just a myth or do you think that that's true of teenagers and what's happening developmentally, emotionally during this stage?

Lisa Damour: Well, so that is true that adolescents experience emotions more, um, vividly than children do, and then adults do. And it's very much a function of their neurological development, that their brains are remodeling, becoming faster and more powerful and more efficient. And the remodeling process happens in the order in which the brain initially developed, which is from the lower order regions towards the back of the brain that house the emotions up to the higher order regions towards the front of, front of the brain that houses the perspective maintaining systems.

And so there [00:17:00] is always for teenagers, a juncture where their emotion centers have been upgraded and yet their ability to maintain prospective centers have not yet been upgraded. And so when they get stirred up, It's a very intense experience for them and also for the people around them and their ability to maintain.

Perspective or see things, you know, in a calmer way. It's just compromised as a function of where they sit developmentally. But I think this again gets to a place where we can bring more nuance. To what are often, kind of broadly dismissive com comments about teenagers or just not altogether accurate and also negative comments.

So, you know, you hear all the time people saying, you know, teenagers in their brains, like, they're not fully developed till they're 24, 25. All right. Technically that is accurate cuz what we think is that it's, it takes until about 24, 25 for the entire renovation process to be complete and for the emo the perspective maintaining systems to [00:18:00] be as upgraded as every other part of the brain.

But what we think is, well, when teenagers are calm, when their emotion centers are not amped up, they reason great and they reason as well as adults. And I also think it's so funny to me when people are like, oh, teenagers, their brains aren't really developed. I'm like, um, did you see that AP English paper that junior wrote?

Right. Or did you see this extraordinary work of art that, you know, this, this high school sophomore created? Like that's not a developed brain. Like then what's happening here? Right. So I think. I always wanna try to bring some nuance to that idea and just say, yeah, unless they're very upset, they reason beautifully.

It's only when they become stirred up that their perspective maintaining systems can be knocked off line more readily than can happen in adulthood.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, actually I'm gonna weave in a question that I was planning to ask you a little bit later, but it's about that idea of. You know, I guess being [00:19:00] able to make a, a smart decision when they are revved up. Right. So you, one of the things in your book is this idea of hot and cold cognition. Um, could you say a little bit about that and how, maybe parents, because I kind of wanna weave in some, some concrete ideas of things people can do.

So how might parents use that to help prepare them for situations where maybe they're, you know, in the heat of the moment?

Lisa Damour: Absolutely. So we do make this distinction between hot and cold cognition. And cold cognition is exactly the circumstance I described, which is the kid is calm. So maybe it's Friday afternoon, you know, you're in your kitchen seeing your kid after school and you're like, Hey, what are your plans for the evening?

And they're like, uh, I'm going to this party. And you're like, Hey, we know that house. Like there's gonna be drinking. And your kid's like, I know, and you know what? I'm not drinking. Like, it's too dicey. You know, I'm, I'm, I'm, I'm

not drinking. It's, that's my plan. And they are at ease. They're not surrounded by [00:20:00] their peers.

They're not in the heat of a social moment, and they're telling the truth. And I think that's important that the kid means what they say in those moments. What we can contrast that with is hot cognition, which is when reasoning is informed by a very charged social or emotional experience. So here we go, right?

Like in terms of the ability of the emotion centers to outmatch, the reasoning centers. So then what can happen is that same kid gets to the party where they really walk in with no intention of drinking, and then they get there and they're like, oh, the kid I have a crush on is here. Hey, the kid I have a crush on is asking me if I want a drink.

Right? Like, okay, I'll have a drink. Right? Like that. They, you know, other forces take over and now they're not doing what they thought they were gonna do. So, Adults need to account for this, that teenagers really have two different operating systems when it comes to decision making. And those operating systems are gonna be informed by how stirred up they feel by what's going on.

And the best we can do, and this is not a [00:21:00] perfect solution, but it's it's worth a shot, is under cold conditions plan for hot conditions. So when the kid at four o'clock is like, yeah, yeah, yeah, and I'm going to that party, I'm not gonna drink. The adults should say, great, we agree. We think you're safer if you don't, but let's talk it through.

Let's say you get there and everyone's drinking, or let's say you get there and the kid you have a crush on, you know, offers you a drink. I. What's the plan like? What are you gonna do in that moment to stick with what we're agreeing to right now, which is that you're not gonna drink and have the kid play it out.

Like I'll tell them that I, you know, I'll drive, I'll be the one who's driving, right? So why don't I drive tonight? And then I'll say, I can't cause I'm driving. Or I'll tell them that you breathalyze me when I, you know, like something, it doesn't even have to be true.

Debbie Sorensen: Mm-hmm.

Lisa Damour: What you don't want is a kid in a hot condition trying to make a decision on the fly.

And so to try to prevent that is really the goal.

Debbie Sorensen: You know, I, as a [00:22:00] clinician, I only work with adults, but I sometimes do that with adult clients too, because maybe they're working on better communication with their partner or an emotion skill of some kind, and it's like, well, let's practice it now and. Things are pretty calm and cool and they get better at it, and so that you know, then when your emotions are off the charts, you have a, you're more practiced, you know what to do and you can think it through in a way that's really hard to do.

I think when, for all of us, when emotions are running hot,

Lisa Damour: absolutely. Absolutely. Like you don't wanna back yourself into that corner.

Debbie Sorensen: Right. So you offer some different myths of emotions in your book and I think one that I really wanna hone in on here, and I think listeners to the podcast will, this will sound familiar cuz we talk about this a lot, but just this idea that. That difficult emotions are bad for us or should be avoidant.

Avoided. And I think sometimes as parents, we might think that for teenagers, right? Like, oh, it's, we don't want them to go through distress. We don't want them to feel emotions. But [00:23:00] you really argue that that's, that's not a helpful way to look at it. Could you say a little bit more about the harm of, of, of that myth?

Lisa Damour: Sure, and, and I think, you know, if we go back to how potent adolescent emotions can be, I have a lot of empathy for the parent who's looking at their kid having a full on meltdown in the kitchen and a lot of empathy for the parent thinking this can't be good and this is maybe harming my kid and, and I think, I haven't heard it articulated so directly, but I often feel like it's very helpful to say, I think parents worry that if their teenager becomes very, very upset, it will hurt their kid and, and it's such a concrete thing and I think it's really true, but we don't say it that directly. And so the first thing I think that's important to articulate is emotions actually don't damage people with one exception. And that exception is trauma, that we do [00:24:00] recognize that there are experiences that happen to people that are so overwhelming that they outmatch that person's coping. And we call, that's what, that's what a trauma is.

Um, it's not the event itself, it's the whatever the event is. Just absolutely overwhelms their ability to cope with it and does do lasting damage. Like we know that like the trauma can cause harm, it can rewire the nervous system, which doesn't mean the nervous system can't get re wired, but it, it just, it's, it's a problem. So we have to be mindful about preventing trauma. Like nobody

trauma's good for nobody. And if psychologists could prevent all trauma, of course, you know, we would. But most things are not trauma. Most things are just very upsetting and it's important that we, the adults around teenagers can get used to the idea or work to get used to the idea that experiencing emotional distress is not only not [00:25:00] damaging to your kid, it's usually growth giving.

It's what they are. As humans, we are all designed to withstand. Quite a bit of emotional distress. And what we're really interested in is how well do they cope and can they bring good coping on board? Can they turn to good coping themselves? Can they, you know, ask people for support in coping? That's really what we're interested in.

But I'll tell you that, um, I, I had the most wonderful experience last week. I was speaking virtually to a high school and, um, arranged, and this is such a fun thing to do, arranged with the school. It was to the high school seniors. That the students would all have their phones with 'em, and we would send them a link to a Google Doc that I had access to, and I would talk with them a little bit about. The transition to college, cuz this was a group of high school seniors and they were all, it's like largely a population that's headed off to college. And then after I talked both of them for a while, they could use their phones to enter questions into the [00:26:00] Google talk. And so I saw them on my computer popping up and I could answer them in real time.

And so it was anonymous,

Debbie Sorensen: so cool.

Lisa Damour: was super cool. And it was, I could see who the questions are coming from, but I don't know these kids. Um, But I, and I wouldn't give the name of the question, but that way everybody could ask a question without feeling the least bit embarrassed about their question in front of their peers.

And one question, which for some reason I strongly suspect it came from a boy. And I was like, this is part of why I do this, is if you otherwise, boys don't ask questions in groups and this, this really opens up the doors. And one kid, I don't know why I thought I was a boy, said, um, I'm afraid my dog is gonna die while I'm in college. And what do I do? You know, and, and I said to the whole audience, I read the question. I said, here's the thing, if your dog dies, you can be really sad, and that's what you're supposed to feel. And it's not gonna harm you to feel those feelings. And your job is to take good care of yourself and find healthy [00:27:00] ways to cope with those feelings.

Okay? Now, you and I both know I am saying nothing but the most basic, well-established. Views from academic and clinical psychology. They sound revolutionary only because the culture has adopted such a defensive posture toward distress. But that was how I handled it with this particular student, and it really does feel like.

I'm getting way too much credit right now for saying what it is we know to be true about how emotions operate.

Debbie Sorensen: That is such a sweet story. I

Lisa Damour: Isn't it just, I mean, they're just so great. One kid tried to get me to do his prom. It was

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, that's

Lisa Damour: was adorable. Adorable.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, and I do think, you know, one of the things that's in your book that's really helpful are some strategies that parents can [00:28:00] use to help their K, their kids, their teenagers, navigate some of these emotional ups and downs and learn how to do that, and how to maybe take that different perspective on emotions, which you're right, it's not really that groundbreaking, but it kind of is when.

The culture has been telling us the opposite for so long. Um, one of the suggestions that you offer is helping them learn how to express their feelings. Um, what do you think is, what are some helpful things that parents can do for kids to learn that?

Lisa Damour: So just to back us up a few steps and then come into it. So, you know, the argument I'm making in this book is that we really do need to revisit how we talk and think about mental health because where the culture's gone and where we clinicians sit, you know, very far apart from each other. So the culture's attitude, and again, I'm broad generalizations, is that.

You know, you're mentally healthy. If you feel good, you know your kid's mentally healthy if they feel good, right? Like basically, as long as [00:29:00] distress isn't in the picture, that's not what mental health is. Mental health we know is about having feelings that make sense and then managing those feelings well.

And that can include a very wide range of extremely unpleasant emotions. But basically where the rubber hits the road is on coping. It's not the presence or absence of distress, it's how one copes with it that is of most interest to us clinically. When psychologists think about coping, we think about emotion regulation, the ability to regulate one's emotions, and we think in two categories that sometimes we regulate by expressing feelings, and sometimes we regulate by finding ways to control or tame emotions. The culture right now is very heavily tipped towards the first. We talk a lot about getting kids to talk about their emotions, and we'll talk about that. But I think it's important to notice also, or to note that psychologists put these on equal footing. Like there's a lot of value in helping kids learn how to also quiet their own emotions, soothe themselves, you know, feel [00:30:00] that they can control and not just, you not only have expression as their their, um, option, but we do want them to express and we know that that can be valuable.

And I would tell you, I think the number one barrier. And I don't say this lightly cuz I don't, I'm, I'm really very rarely critical. I think the number one barrier to kids expressing their emotion is how we respond when, when they actually do. So I think, you know, we, adults sit around all the time, like, gosh, it would be really great if kids talk to us about their feelings.

And then a kid walks in the door and they're like, oh my gosh, I had the worst day ever and I can't stand, you know, fill in the blank. And I promise you, I think 98% of the time, The response the kid is looking for is like, holy moly, that stinks. I'm so sorry. Like what a lousy day. Right? Just like empathy or curiosity, like, tell me more.

And I would say, I'm just making out numbers 79% of the time. Instead of that which they're actually looking for, we're like, [00:31:00] oh, I'm sure it wasn't that bad. Or, what are you talking about? Or, you know, you need to look on the bright side of things. Or you know, why are you always so grumpy? Which the kid is like, oh, why do I even try?

And so I think they'll like, like almost comical irony in this is that we're constantly saying, oh, if only teenagers would talk with us about our feelings. And that we're constantly pulled Me too, as a parent, toward advice giving or correction when they do, which makes them wish they hadn't.

Debbie Sorensen: Yes, exactly. You know? Yeah. We just need to be receptive and listen and you know. Yeah.

Lisa Damour: Curiosity followed by empathy. That's like the basic formula. And here's the thing, that doesn't mean that's where it stops. I mean, there may be a conversation where you end up giving advice or saying, you know, was there anything decent that happened today? But I'm sort of getting more and more. I. I'm turning into one of those mid late career psychologists where I'm like, eh, it's all getting pretty basic and clear.

So I'm like, there's some things that you just, no matter what, they're gonna help [00:32:00] and they certainly won't hurt and you should probably start with them. So for when a kid is talking about feelings, curiosity followed by empathy, almost always gonna get you where you need to go. And then the other thing I'm getting more clarity on is, yeah, they just need more sleep.

You know, like, and again, like won't hurt, will probably help.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And some of the strategies in your book are that simple, you know, make sure they're sleeping, that kind of thing. Right.

Lisa Damour: Absolutely.

Debbie Sorensen: So I think some parents are probably listening and wonder where do we draw the line though? Because certainly there are some kids who are very depressed. There are some kids who are into some pretty scary high risk behaviors like substance abuse and other kinds of risky behaviors.

And I know some of that is normal. Quote normal too, right? Like that they, they maybe have a little desire to get out in the world and do things that are a stretch. Um, do you have thoughts about like, how do you know, is this just, okay, let's just talk about this with empathy versus should I actually be getting some professional help or, or [00:33:00] something like that?

Lisa Damour: So if we go back to the the model of like, what is mental health? It's having feelings that fit the circumstance and then handling those feelings well. So that also clarifies very, I think, Directly when we're not looking at mental health. So if we just start with the feelings that fit the circumstance.

Psychologists like anxiety. We see anxiety as a useful protective emotion if it fits the conditions right? So if you're driving and somebody is swerving next to you, we would like to see some anxiety cuz that will help you drive more safely or get away from that driver. If it is a Sunday morning and your kid's work is done, there's nothing to worry about.

They should be able to relax. They finally, you know, Are in a good spot and they have persistent anxiety. Okay, that doesn't make sense. And we would then address that clinically like that. We don't expect to see distress in the absence of something causing it. So that doesn't make sense for anxiety. It doesn't make sense, you know, sadness.

We expect to see, you know, you're [00:34:00] sad about something, depression, you're sad about everything. We can't necessarily attach it to a cause. So if the feeling is illogical, That's a flag. Then the other flag is, well, the feeling may make sense. Like the kid may be really anxious because they haven't done their schoolwork, but if their coping is problematic, that's the other flag.

So what we wanna see if a kid's really anxious about the schoolwork they haven't done is that they start doing their work, like that would be a really good form of coping. What we don't wanna see is them saying, well, you know what? I'll just get super high and then my anxiety won't bother me anymore. So, The category I think about in terms of when to worry is there's two categories.

Either the feeling does not add up, like it just doesn't fit something's, you know, amiss or what I call costly coping, that a kid is in distress and the way they're managing that distress is they're abusing substances or they're, you know, Tearing at the fabric of relationships. They're taking it out on [00:35:00] everyone around them, or they're not taking good care of themselves as a way to manage that distress.

Either engaging in highly risky behavior or self-harming behavior, or running themselves down or feeling bleak and suicidal. Right. Like that.

Debbie Sorensen: video games, like they're staying up all night playing video games, so distract themselves.

Lisa Damour: Absolutely. And that's like that. So that's a, and video games and distraction are so important because there's. Value in those for coping, right? A little bit can be sometimes how a kid is just like puts the day behind them. It becomes costly coping if it starts to come at the expense of other things.

Right? So that's, I really, in writing this book, I really came around on distraction. Like we all use distraction all the time to regulate our emotions, but. You know, 10 minutes, or, I don't know, probably more than 10 minutes, you know, a little video game if that helps the kid, you know, put the day in the books and then get down to their homework.

That's a good use of distraction. If they get so deep into the video games that they are now behind on their [00:36:00] homework or they're not getting enough sleep, or they haven't moved, or they're not seeing friends, now you're into costly coping. So, They're coping, but there's a price tag attached. So that's what we wanna see.

It's, it's not the presence or absence of distress, it's that distress fits, you know, really like we can see why the person has the feeling they have and that it is well managed.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Yeah. So I, I told you that I asked several of my friends to send questions for you, and one that came up from several people I think, which I think is Indi is indicative, is the idea that as, as people move into adolescences and move through adolescents, peers become really important and parents might feel like they have less influence than they used to.

Um, So what do you say to parents who wonder, you know, is it too late for me to have an impact on my child? Does my parenting even matter anymore? Um, you know, what, what are your thoughts on [00:37:00] that?

Lisa Damour: Well, it is true, right? That it, it's, it's a sign of healthy development for adolescents to loosen their ties to us and to strengthen their ties to their peers. Like we, it, it doesn't feel good all the time for the parent, but actually it's evidence that things are proceeding as they should. And it's also what lays the groundwork for things like kids being able to move out, right?

So we, you know, like this is part of a larger plan. What we know from the research is that teenagers care what parents think. They care what their parents think, and when adults maintain open lines of communication and articulate their values, and I think for me, the most important things offer themselves as partners and safety and will come back to that. What we know is it actually has a meaningful impact on adolescent behavior that. When adults articulate their values, teenagers often cleave far more to those values than the adults even realize. Um, you know, when in terms of maintaining [00:38:00] open lines of communication, you know, if the kid comes home and is like, man, there's a bunch of eighth graders, you know, getting into weed gummies, if the adult responds with like, whoa, like, I'm kind of surprised.

Are you kind of surprised? Like what are you thinking and ke and makes that a conversation as opposed to like, do not let me catch you. You know, or what, or you know, very strong negative reaction. I think that can be really helpful. And I

think on the, the safety piece, you know, this thing I'm really thinking about all the time is, We do teen, we don't do safety to teenagers.

We do it with teenagers because they have so much freedom and autonomy as they should. So it goes back to that conversation in the kitchen where the adult could say like, okay, but if you do go to that party and you do get drunk, like you are grounded till you're 35. That's one take on it, which is now like using threats and fear to try to get the kid to.

Do the right thing. The other is for the adult to say, look, we're really in agreement with your planning. We also understand you get to parties and the scene changes. Your safety [00:39:00] matters more to us than anything in the whole wide world. So A, what is the plan for how you're gonna stay sober? And B, you also know that if things don't go the way we're planning and you don't feel safe, we are here.

To help you and we will never make you sorry that you've asked for our help. Like those kinds of communications are enormously powerful. I think the place where adults get derailed and needlessly, so is that when we lay our wisdom on our teenagers, they tend to roll their eyes when we're like, you know, when they're like so-and-sos.

You know, having sex with lots of people and we're like, you know, we can do it in a gentles way and in a way that I like, thoughtful and practice. We might say, wow, that's amazing. Like, I just hope that that's what she wants. I hope she's taking good care of herself. Right. So you could do it in a non-judgmental and.

Any self-respecting teenagers would be like, oh [00:40:00] gosh, oh, come on. Right? Like, they're gonna do that because they have to, because they need to establish their autonomy. And the weirder response would be if a teenager were like, I am so glad you brought up that value. You know, I've been thinking about that too, and I'm worried about like, they're not gonna do that.

And so I think. We should not be the least, but put off by the eye rolling or the shrugging or the face making. When we are trying to communicate our values and beliefs and wishes, that is teenagers maintaining their autonomy. I would be actually really much more curious about the kid who's like, oh, I love that you shared it that way.

I'd be like, okay, that kid's up to something, like something's going on. And so in my own home with my own adolescence, Eye rolling. I translated in my

mind, whatever else it is. I translated it is. I heard that, and I think that's a place to start.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:41:00] Yeah. Actually one section that I really loved in your book is about. Why teenagers find their parents so annoying? You know, they have this visceral, like, ugh, you know, everything you do, these little things like chewing or the way you dress or something like that starts to really bother them. Why is that happening from a developmental lens?

Lisa Damour: Oh man. I have to say like there's stuff you learned in grad school, there's stuff you kind of bumble through in your practice and then you have your own kids and you're like, oh my gosh, like this is all much more intense and also clear to me than it used to be. And I will say that is true about. Age 13 is basically what I would call that whole transition.

So you and I were both trained, right, like in the idea of separation, individuation, that there are points in development where kids need to really work to establish a separate identity, um, and feel themselves to be very much an individual. And I think one of the key points, so three year olds, and then I think one of the key points again is [00:42:00] around age 13 and. I think you could headline this, se this title, this Time of Life, like Parents Can't Win, and the reason for that is the child is working to establish a separate identity. I use the language in the book of like build their own brand and it, it does kind of work to think about it in brand terms. So they're trying to build their own brand.

So if there's anything that the parent does that actually matches the child's idea of their emerging brand, that is annoying to the parent, to the child. So for example, say the parent has always liked Beyonce. Say the 13 year old catches on and decides they like Beyonce. Now the 13 year old will have a huge problem with the fact that the parent likes Beyonce cuz it's stepping on their emerging brand.

Debbie Sorensen: Mm-hmm.

Lisa Damour: Now the other problem though is that at 12 and 13 kids are still very much in nestled in the puso of the family, that our brands reflect on them. And so anything that the parent does that does not fit with this [00:43:00] young person's emerging sense of their brand, this is also annoying cuz it's off brand. So there's sum total of this is anything we do that is like how this young person sees themselves becoming.

Is antagonizing. Anything we do that is unlike how they see themselves becoming is antagonizing sum total. Everything we do is annoying and it just stinks. It stinks for them. It stinks for us cuz like, you can't breathe right the way you don't like, you're really gonna wear those shoes and I can't believe it.

And like, why do you even ask questions like that? So the, the solution here, one is don't take it personally. This is. You can set your watch by this two. You can lay out parameters for behavior. You can say, look, I may be rubbing you the wrong way, but you got three options for how to interact with me. You can be polite, you can be friendly, that'd be great.

Or you can tell me you need some space, but you can't talk to me. In a way that we never speak in this [00:44:00] home. And I think the other thing you can do is you can know that it doesn't last, cuz soon kids do start to consolidate a sense of identity. Um, I would say by age 14, you know, one of the nice things is like a lot of kids are into ninth grade.

Ninth grade comes with a lot of options for how they can specialize in things or, you know, become more skilled in area interests. And so, um, once kids start to get their hands around who they are and what they're about, And their brand becomes more solidified. They don't mind us so much with our Dowdy brands

Debbie Sorensen: Mm.

Lisa Damour: because they've got their own brand worked out.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, it is funny to think about that, how we know this in theory, right? That they will separate and they'll carve out their own identity. But then the way it comes out in practice is so interesting.

Lisa Damour: It's not fun. Not fun for anybody.

Debbie Sorensen: So you have a chapter on gender differences in emotion. And I know you make it very clear it's not, not everyone's falls into these binary categories.

It's not, it's not always [00:45:00] so straightforward, right? That these differences, you know, are so, um, You know, so clear between the two. But, or, let me put it this way. You make it clear that these gender differences in emotions are not so universal, but that there are some trends. And I actually wanna, I wanna ask a question that's a little more specific to typically what happens with girls and then one of our boys.

Um, so starting with girls, because I know. You know, you've written your two previous books are a bit more focused on girls. Um, and one of the things in the book is about how they tend to have more internalizing issues, right? Like depression and anxiety. And then under pressure you write a lot about anxiety and stress among girls.

And I've just been noticing in the media lately, there's a lot of talk about this right now, um, that girls are going through so much and um, that pressure is really. I think taking a toll on girls. Um, so I was wondering if you could just say a few words, I know you've written [00:46:00] books about this, so there's a lot to say about it, but can you say a little bit about that with, for parents who might be noticing that with their children, I.

Lisa Damour: Yeah, no. So you know, one of our cardinal rules in psychology is that under distressed girls are more likely to internalize and boys are more likely to externalize. So what we mean by that is girls are more likely to collapse in on themselves. Boys are more likely to act out the collapsing in on themselves.

Disorders are basically anxiety and depression. And we do see very high rates of anxiety and depression and rising rates in girls. And then also, Bigger and bigger cap relative to boys, right? I mean, there were the C d C data that were reported in February of this year that were actually data collected in the fall of 2021, asking about mood over the previous year, which is an important asterisk to put on those data.

I mean, they asked the kids, how did you feel through the pandemic, which shockingly. Not good. Um, and so we need to just note those in time. But it also reported this, this big [00:47:00] gender difference, um, which I'm sure, and they, they, the, that report did not diagnose anxiety and depression. It just asked about low mood over a period of two weeks or more, um, and self-report.

So there's something very real. Girls are reporting much more internalizing distress than boys are, and needs to be taken very seriously at the same time. Those self-report measures are not asking, have you been a jerk lately? Are you taking your feelings out on other people lately? Right? The kinds of questions that are gonna pick up the behaviors that we are more likely to see in boys in distress.

And so part of what happens in the reporting is that girls look so bad and I don't wanna in any way minimize that. Like, we wanna take that, you know, take care

of that and, and address it very seriously. But I don't wanna also say, oh, that must mean the boys look good, right? I mean, the boys I'm sure are suffering.

Um, they may be suffering in different ways or as a result of different things, but we're not [00:48:00] actually often asking the kinds of questions that are gonna surface how boys themselves are suffering or how they're causing suffering and others as a result of their own suffering. So it's an, it's a, um, it's a bit of a tangle. And, and I think one that, um, I'm just, I just watched the discourse around it and, and I'll give you a good example of where I'm like, Ooh, we gotta get into these, like, you know, more nuanced pieces. I'm hearing more and more, um, of boys getting into online spaces where flagrant misogyny is the norm. You know, sort of Andrew Tate and his successors have created spaces online that are like, Horrendous.

Like, absolutely like disgusting and, um, unguarded, you know, unfiltered misogyny. I'm hearing that those boys are then sometimes showing up at school and like saying these things and, and just parroting this stuff. I. Which they're saying it to girls, right? And so I think it's interesting because [00:49:00] though we don't, we're not asking any questions that detect the fact that this is occurring for the boys.

Obviously this is really concerning for the boys and really worrisome about like what is going on, that they are there, that they are getting into this stuff. Like what is it telling us about how they feel about themselves or masculinity? Like we gotta know. But what's interesting is that problem. Is probably most detected when we start to see the rising rates of depression or anxiety in girls. Um, not detected by looking at what may be going on for boys.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I'm glad you raised that because I, I had made a note as I was reading about, we talk a lot about mean girls, but actually boys are much more likely to be harassing and taunting girls. And I've even experienced that a little bit with my daughters and it was handled really well by the school and that kind of thing.

Um, one of my daughters experienced this, um, in fifth grade and, um, I actually, my thought, and the [00:50:00] question I wanted to ask you about boys is like, are there things parents should be. Doing to try to keep that kind of, so it's an externalizing behavior, but it does show up in like an aggressive form toward other kids,

Lisa Damour: Yeah. And like the kids suffering and he's causing suffering, right? I mean, so it's a, you know, and like, so girls may be suffering, but often

they are. Taking it out on themselves. So Noma, this is good, but I think, um, you know, there's another section in my book that could be titled, it's really Hard to be a sixth Grade Boy, right?

I mean, it, you know, that's really what you could have titled it. I could have titled it. And what I was looking at there is this interesting thing, and I kind of can't believe no one said this before and it's got the longest note ever in the back of the book where I'm trying to say like, I really did not say this anywhere in the literature.

So if somebody else said it, like my fault for missing it, but here's how I'm constructing this argument. You know, there's two things that happen at once in the sixth grade. One is we see sexual harassment begin. We've always, you know, as long as we've been starting it recently noted that this is when it kicks off, which is way younger than people, I think [00:51:00] tend to be imagining.

The other thing that's happening in the sixth grade, and I and I, and to make this argument, I pulled the height and weight and speed and strength data. Is that sixth grade girls are by and large, bigger, faster, and stronger than sixth grade boys, and it's just because they've hit puberty two years earlier on average, so their bodies are just more developed.

It is also true that this pubertal advantage is neurological as well. The sixth grade girls are able to think in more sophisticated ways, and also from the minute they hit school. School is better designed for girls. They're, you know, Outpacing boys academically from day one all the way through, you know, 50th grade at this point.

I mean, like, we have the data. Um, and so I think I was thinking like, okay, this is really interesting. So Sam, I'm a sixth grade boy and I'm in the averages, right? I'm hitting puberty, you know, around the mean. When I go to recess, I am getting beat left and right by the [00:52:00] girls, and then when I walk back in class, I'm getting beat left and right by the girls.

Also in sixth grade, I'm starting to consolidate my sense of masculinity, which as one boy told me is basically entirely, um, you know, coalesces around the idea that there's nothing worse in the whole wide world than getting beat by a girl. And then lo and behold, sexual harassment begins at this time.

And I'm like, these have gotta be linked, right? That there are some boys who just, this is more than they can take and. You can sure take a girl down a few pegs if you comment on her boobs, her butt, something sexual. And I think we

need to line all this up and think about how are our boys doing? How do we help them maintain a self sense of self-esteem through this developmental juncture that is bluntly just stacked against them? How do we handle it if they make a bad choice about how to try to maintain self-esteem? [00:53:00] I, I don't know that we're spending time in this space, and I think for the sake of the boys and the sake of the girls, you know, not even thinking about kids who don't fit those categories, which we need to. There's work to be done.

Debbie Sorensen: Do you have any words of wisdom for parents? I think it's typically boys, but um, who are maybe underachieving at school or just disengaging. They're just not feeling like it's important maybe in early high school or something. They're just kind of, and, and again, I think in my experience with my friends who've experienced this, it does tend to be boys, but I wouldn't.

Imagine that it has to be boys, but I think it's really tough for the parents, and they're usually smart kids. They've just decided school's not important to me.

Lisa Damour: I hear this a lot and there are some girls, but you are right. I mean, if we just like look at like what we hear anecdotally, it tends to be boys and there's reasons why it's likely to be boys, you know? So one is I. You know, maturationally, we just know that they're a little bit behind the girls and, and that's, you know, [00:54:00] largely again, like when you're talking ninth grade, you're still looking at pubertal effects.

Like those are not gone. And so they don't always just have the, um, perspective and thoughtfulness as a function of just still being very concrete in their thinking. Again, a neurological reality to put two and two together, that the choices I'm making at 14. May limit the options I have at 18. Like, they just, they, they're not always able to think in those terms. The other thing that happens far too often is that because the girls have so cornered the market on academic excellence, that boys start to feel like, you know, that's a girl thing to do, to be serious about school and it's like uncool, um, to be. That and a friend of mine who had three sons who did actually they, these boys thrived academically, but they referred to the girls as the try hearts. And, and I think first of all, the girls probably were overexerting themselves. Girls [00:55:00] tend not to be very efficient. You know, they really not only do well academically, they tend to overdo well academically. And that's a lot of what I try to unpack in under pressure. But I think it's really hard if you have a, you know, still pretty concrete in his thinking, 13 to 14 year old boy who's into the ninth grade and who like, Would really rather do other things than study hard

and also doesn't wanna be like those girls who are, you know, nose to the grindstone and also have such a, a huge, like advantage.

I mean, they're just so far, they're like coming into ninth grade, you know, basically with the skills in the organization that, um, you know, a lot of. Adolescent boys don't get till later. I mean, I, I can see why they're just like, I'm not gonna compete with this. Like, and I'm gonna say it's dumb to do. Right.

So it's, it's tricky. And, and it's interesting, um, in my own podcast, ask Lisa, um, we have an episode, Rena, my colleague and I, about when should you bribe kids? And actually, this is one of the rare [00:56:00] exceptions I'll make, which is like, you know, 14 year old boys don't always get it, that they're shooting themselves in the foot.

And if you need to bribe 'em just so that they don't actually. You know, really hamstring themselves. I'm not against it. Like desperate times, desperate measures.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Gotta do what you gotta

Lisa Damour: Got it. You know, like he may really regret this, but you know, you can't convince him of that now.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Yeah. Well, if we bring it back to girls, so as my girls gear up toward, they get, they're getting closer to middle school and beyond. Do you have any advice for me to try to, I don't know if I can prevent it, but to, to keep them from feeling such intense pressure and anxiety that I'm hearing about. Um, what, what, what advice do you have for me on that?

Lisa Damour: Yeah. Um, so this is like really like probably my book Under Pressure is where I thought this most through. And, and one of the things that to me felt important and that really shaped my parenting of two daughters was to really watch for the moment when [00:57:00] any student of any gender has a well established work ethic.

And again, big generalizations. Girls tend to get this nailed down before boys do, but they're also highly conscientious male students and usually, especially for girls, it's somewhere over the course of middle school that they really figure out how to work and to work well as soon as that is in place. It is time to help that student of any gender become tactical in the deployment of their efforts to say to them, okay, you know how to work. When the time comes, you can really put your nose to the grindstone. This is important for you to know how to do.

Now I want you to become strategic. You have one take of gas to get you through the week.

If you floor it on every single assignment, you're gonna be on fumes before the week is out. Your job now is to start to figure out when you need to fluoride and when you can coast. And they need our support to do this. They need language like tactical and strategic. If you tell them to [00:58:00] back off, it bothers them cuz they're like, what are you talking about?

Like, you've been praising me all this time for working like this and now you're telling me I've been doing it wrong. So really treat it as like the next step in their evolution of students. I. Um, in my new book, I introduce a metaphor of school being like a mandatory buffet where we require students to eat everything on the buffet.

I have no problem with that, but I don't think they need to fake it like they like it all right? Like they didn't put the put on their plates. So I think we can have much more open and honest conversations with kids about, like, look, you know, that class may not be your cup of tea. You still gotta drink it, but we're here to make it.

More palatable to you? Like, do you want me to sit next to you while you do the work? You know, how much of a do you have to do to get the grade or the mastery you want? I think there are ways that are low hanging fruit for us to help all students feel, um, you know, more efficient in their approach to school.

And also, um, more supported around the fact that there's a lot that we ask teenagers to [00:59:00] do that. They wouldn't have chosen if left to their own devices, and we can have open conversations about that, and teenagers are usually very appreciative of our honesty on those fronts.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Well, I appreciate that advice and I think that's a skill that's helpful. Too that many adults are working on where it's kind of prioritizing and not feeling like you have to be good at everything all the time. And, you know, sort of taking some of that pressure off. Um, it's a good skill to learn before they're stressed out throughout the rest of their lives too.

Yeah. Well, thank you so much, Lisa. I had many more questions I could have asked you, but I'm aware of the time and so I'll just have to, um, you know, save them for another time and keep consulting your books, which are terrific. Um, I highly recommend your books and your podcast. Ask Lisa to our listeners, where can people find you online and learn more?

Lisa Damour: Probably the best clearinghouse is my website, which is [dr lisa de moore.com](http://dr.lisadamour.com) that has everything. And then I, um, I post [01:00:00] almost daily on Instagram and Twitter and Facebook, just trying to put out content that's useful to, uh, to people caring for kids.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I think almost anyone look who's, who has a teenager and is looking for advice will find something about their situation in what, you know, whether it's in your podcast or one of your books, it's there. You know, there's so many examples and, and helpful tips there. So thank you Lisa. I really appreciate you coming on.

Lisa Damour: You bet,, thanks so much for having me.

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