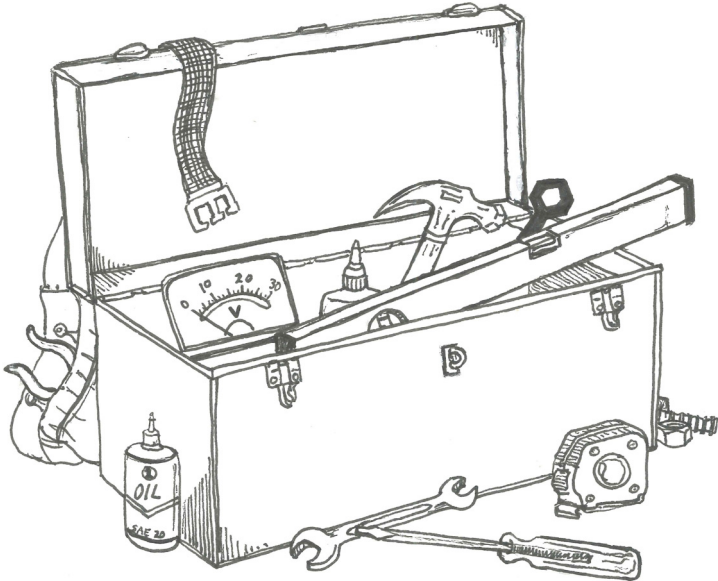


## PART I

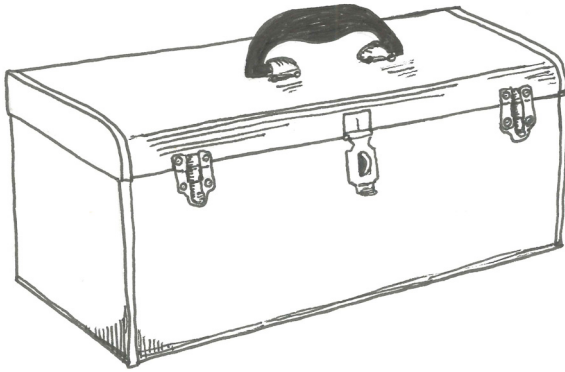
# *Is This Book for You?*





## CHAPTER 1

# *Let's Get Started*



### **Imagine These Scenarios**

Life has been pretty normal for the Judson family. They have two daughters: Elizabeth is in college and Rebecca is a sophomore in high school. So far, things have gone well. Both girls have been honor students and each has had friends whom the parents have enjoyed. Elizabeth is an athlete and Rebecca loves to play the cello.

Starting a few months ago, however, the parents began to worry about Rebecca. It became apparent that she had been lying about where she was going and with whom she was spending time. She has also ignored her

curfew for the past three weekends. The Judsons never had these problems with Elizabeth.

Meanwhile, in the Miller family, a shouting match between Dad and daughter Susan once again ended with her angrily storming off. Moments afterward, a frustrated Dad recalled his high-school days, and realized that he was beginning to sound just like his own father had. He remembered how he hated fighting with his dad, and how he had sworn that he would not be inflexible and closed-minded with his children. Dad would like to do things differently.

*The Tool Box* is designed for use with mainstream teenage scenarios. All families have times when everyday life feels overwhelming and, when that family has a teenager in the picture, stress can be high. This hands-on, easy-to-understand book will provide a variety of strategies and specific tools to help parents communicate with and nourish teenagers.

This is an action-oriented reference guide, a “how-to” manual for people whose children have become, or are about to become, teenagers. The chapters offer new skills to apply to various situations, including discipline, communication, negotiation, compromise, trust, tips for self-esteem, peer pressure, basic coping skills, money issues, and physical activity. It will be helpful for those who are already wading through difficult issues as well as for those who want to enter this phase with new tools in hand.

Kids today live in a very complicated world, and raising them is more complex than ever before. Gathering a lot of theory or devoting time to too much study will not help us be successful with the spontaneous interactions in which we often find ourselves with young people. *The Tool Box* provides a variety of strategies and specific tools, coaching adults who live and work with adolescents, so the adults survive and the kids thrive.

## **How to Use This Book**

Read this book in a time of calmness. It is helpful to become familiar with the tools when we are not amidst a stressful situation. Plan to revisit it often. Some ideas and concepts hold current interest and some will be more appealing than others. Place a mark in the margin, circle an idea, or dog-ear a page. If it seems like a good idea to try a certain tool right away, *go for it*. Try using

one or two tools. Remember to go back to the book when something feels off target. Each time a chapter is reread, it may offer a new insight.

Raising our children is an ongoing process because our kids change, the world changes, and we change, too. What did not work last month might work this month. Emotional, social, and financial stressors are a huge part of our culture. Influences that did not even exist 10 or 15 years ago affect our families today.

*The Tool Box* understands that parenting is a constantly evolving process, and it has been designed with this in mind. Treat the contents of this book as a collection of tools. All of the ideas are easy to understand and simple to use. Find five likeable tools, try three, and discover one that works!

## Why This Book Helps

*The Tool Box* is for first-time parents as well as for seasoned mommas and poppas. For day-to-day living, many caregivers—including parents, grandparents, and even teachers—need simple ways of doing difficult things.

Parents may feel perplexed by certain issues, such as a teen's escalating social life and the need for curfews, worldly consequences as well as personal ones, self-respect, and respect for authority. These challenges are not very different for the seasoned parent or the veteran teacher, who has tried *everything!* Each child is unique, each community offers its own challenges, and each stage of our own lives brings specific issues. This book is helpful for these varied circumstances.

For example, just because the sink has clogged up—*again*—it does not mean the same thing is clogging it or that the optimal method used to unclog it will be the same. If there is a construction project, and we go to the hardware store to pick up some nails or screws, we may have to try a few before we get the one that will fit the job the best. Likewise, I have spent years collecting techniques, trying them in various situations to see which ones work where and why, and discarding those that don't.

The goal of *The Tool Box* is to share these tools with adults and their kids so that families can work *together*, with a try-one-on-for-size, *solution-focused* approach. In the process, parents—and children—will establish clearer ways to talk with each other.

Sometimes we need a little help to get through a sticky situation with our kids. What works for one child might not work for their sibling, and what worked when that child was 15 won't necessarily work when they're 16.

Perhaps we feel cornered and cannot seem to find our way out. We may realize that what we are doing is not working and want to try something different. *The Tool Box* will provide specific skills for difficult situations and show how to:

- Communicate effectively.
- Identify core issues.
- Be better able to prioritize needs and wants.
- Navigate conflict.
- Learn the wonders of true compromise.

Life can feel overwhelming for a teen, so Chapter 12, "Building a Tool Belt," is dedicated to creating a Tool Belt for our teen. This begins with identifying the skills that teens need to incorporate into their lives to steer through the day-to-day challenges of growing up. It is important that our teen knows we are available as they master their independence. One way we can be helpful is by learning and sharing specific techniques that point them in the right direction. When we, as adults, have the right tools, it is easier to get any job done. Teens need access to their tools, too.

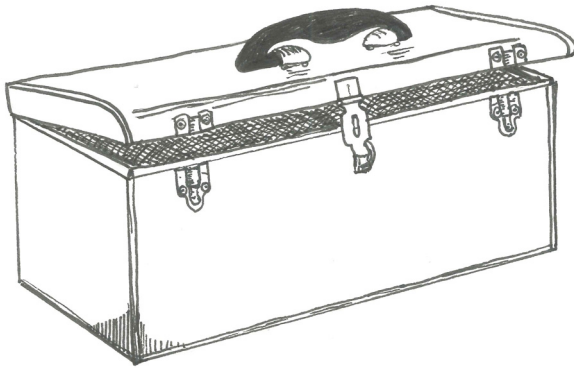
*The Tool Box* is a combination of what I have learned from my academic years, my private practice, seminars, conferences, workshops, books, children, parents, teachers, and other therapists. This collection of techniques is offered as a "menu" of ideas, and a list of tools as useful as the varied supply of nuts and bolts in the hardware store.

A young person's problems are just as diverse as the reason for a clogged drain or a leaky faucet. In either case, we try different tools until we find something that improves the situation. *The Tool Box* offers the best available ideas and tools, and all are practical and easy to use.

Remember: Find five tools of interest, try three, and discover the one that works!

## CHAPTER 2

# *Opening the Toolbox*



### **Basic Concepts**

Many of us who live, work, or interact with teenagers have come to realize that there are times when we would like to try a new approach to these relationships. Some of us may recognize that we are repeating patterns and don't always like where they take us. We are now willing to alter the pattern or "change the dance."

If the porch steps are wobbling, we don't sell the house. We search through our variety of tools to fix the problem. Mechanics and carpenters need to learn about new and improved tools, and how to acquire the instruments that

will allow them to better perform their jobs. We as parents need to update our tools as well so that we can help fix the problem at hand. We will have favorite tools that we use often, and we will use others less frequently. How do we know which tool to use and when?

Here are some basic concepts, which will make choosing the right tool less complicated.

### *The Job of a Parent*

Parenting is hard work and is one of the longest jobs that we will do in our lives. There is no secret recipe; it is an ongoing effort of trial and error. The job description is always changing, the rewards are intangible, there is no retirement age, and the hours are unending.

It is very different to parent a teen in today's world than when our parents were raising us, although the main goal of our job description is the same: to keep our kids as healthy and safe as possible while we help them acquire the skills to become successful adults. The ways in which our parents accomplished this may not always be the best ways now. Times have changed. We might feel hypocritical, but it is okay to say, "Do what I say, not what I did."

The tools in this book will make the job of parenting easier.

### *The Job of a Teenager*

It is a teenager's job to grow up and leave home. It is their goal for themselves and ultimately our goal for them. Teens need to figure out how to be independent and self-sufficient. They need to learn to navigate through a variety of tough situations. Part of this navigation is learning how to rely on themselves and make choices, and then to either suffer or enjoy the consequences.

Most significantly, it is their job to become their own person and figure out their occupation, style of dress, religion, politics, motivation, experimentation, and relationships.

### *The Teenage Brain*

Groundbreaking research<sup>1</sup> has shown that the human brain transforms itself throughout the teen years. Current technology has enabled neuroscientists to view the inner workings of the living human brain. The collected evidence



shows that extensive reorganizing occurs during adolescence; there is documented growth in the cerebral cortex and the parietal and frontal lobes. The frontal lobes help people weigh options, evaluate risks, consider consequences, and make good choices; it is also one of the *last areas of the brain to reach maturity*.

Once we understand that the connections between the *emotional centers* in the brain and the brain's *decision-making centers* are still developing in our 12- to 21-year-olds, we can begin to comprehend the unpredictability in our teen's decision-making process.

It is clear that the brain function of a teen is inconsistent at best. It is as if the teen is thinking with her feelings rather than her brain. The skill of using rational thinking to override intense feelings is not yet solid. Research<sup>2</sup> indicates that these skills are honed through physical changes and growth as well as through experiences and learning.

Consequently, a teenager can be a walking contradiction, at times looking and acting mature and responsible, and then moments later making foolish decisions that seem to come out of nowhere.

“What were you thinking?” we might ask. The answer truly seems to be that *they were not thinking*.

Again, the various components in the adolescent brain that are necessary to maneuver through the decision-making process have not yet solidified or fully matured. Analytical thinking—the skill of comprehending cause and effect, and the ability to foresee consequences of behavior and choice—has just begun to develop. Rational powers are not yet strong enough to be in charge all of the time.

In a calm, cool moment, a teen might very well “get” the right response to a situation; however, in a hot situation, such as when they are surrounded by peers, the emotional part of the brain overrules the more rational thought process. This is when stupid things tend to happen. Over time, the brain learns to balance itself.

The significant brain development that occurs during the teen years takes place in conjunction with life experience. Teens need this understanding and practice in order to establish the balance between thinking, feeling, and behaving. Teens are often exposed to situations where they think they are in control but lack reliable, rational thinking. We need to find ways to keep

them safe as they cross the bridge between feeling like they know something and actually knowing it.

Our challenge is that we cannot easily assess where they are in this process of developing and maturing, yet we need them to stay healthy and safe while they explore and test.

The positive aspect of this inconsistency and turmoil is that the teen brain is certainly impressionable, and we as parents have the ability to affect its growth and direction. We have many opportunities to shift patterns, share, model behavior, discuss perspectives, lead by example, and reassure and support positive actions. *The Tool Box*, with its step-by-step approach, teaches parents how to be effective in identifying problem places, setting clear goals, and meeting objectives.

### *Change the Dance*

Both the parent and the teen have their tasks, and so we do a little dance together: circling, joining hands, taking a bow or two, pulling apart, moving to the left ... Sometimes, though, we are bound to step on each other's feet.

This is the dance of all relationships. We are trying to do our parenting job while he is trying to do his job of becoming independent. There are many variations of this dance. If what we are doing is not working, then it is time to try something different. Being flexible and open to new ideas is the first step of the new dance.

Understand that, if we choose to do something differently, others will eventually have to respond to us in a new, altered way. If we have always waltzed, and we now choose to tango, our partner can no longer waltz with us. The footsteps have shifted and a new pattern of communication has begun.

This process can often feel quite awkward. Think of the confusion if one person attempts to waltz when the other has a tango in mind! During the transition, be prepared to trip over each other until the new rhythm settles in.

### *Emotional Literacy and Coping Skills*

Communication is the most basic tool in our Tool Box. The basic skills of communication include the ability to express what we are feeling and thinking, and listen to and discern what another person is trying to express to us. Without these skills, it is impossible to communicate in a productive manner.

Our feelings influence everything we do. They affect our actions and our moods. They help determine how we think as well as the choices we make. Our feelings shift, vary, and change throughout the day. Sometimes they are very strong and can be overwhelming.

Often, we are faced with multiple emotions at the same time. When this happens, it is crucial to be able to identify our feelings, so we know how to name the thing with which we are dealing and stay in control.

Many teenagers are emotionally illiterate and unable to name their feelings. Sometimes they are quite competent in other ways, such as with sports, art, music, or school. Perhaps they are wonderful readers of books, but they may not know how to read their feelings nor do they know how to express what they are feeling.

*Learning to read their feelings* gives our teens a big head start in identifying and managing who they will be as adults because becoming emotionally literate is the beginning of becoming a successful adult. Mastering the building blocks of communication and identity, as well as the understanding and sharing of our emotions, are critical steps to growth and change.

Learning to handle everyday challenges successfully while balancing the significant issues of growing up safely and healthfully are the coping skills we aim to teach our teens.

### *Understanding Conflict and Compromise*

What is conflict?

- Conflict is a natural part of everyday life.
- Conflict can be handled in positive or negative ways.
- Conflict can have either creative or destructive results.
- Conflict can be a positive force for personal growth and social change.

What is compromise?

- Compromise is not about giving in; it is about solving a problem.
- Compromise allows us to find solutions that are acceptable for everyone.
- Compromise can be a win/win scenario.

Conflict and compromise are part of all of our relationships and can show up in many different aspects of our lives. When people live, work, and

play together, conflicts will happen. Most every dispute or conflict among people involves an attempt to meet a basic and important need for *belonging, power, freedom, and fun*. Our conflicts are important and need to be resolved in positive and creative ways.

Conflict, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. It is an opportunity to figure out who we are, who they are, and what our management styles are.

We deal with conflict all the time: in our families with children, spouses, parents, and siblings; with friends; at work with a boss or manager and fellow employees; with peers and neighbors in our community. Conflict can loosen up a stuck situation, allowing for movement and change.

### *Focus on Solutions*

The tools in *The Tool Box* will give parents and teens the opportunity to try something new. We will spend very little effort blaming others or assigning fault because our focus will be on finding the solution.

*Solutions are in front of us—not behind us.*

Sometimes it is helpful to understand how things got off track but only if we use that information to move ahead.

By opening *The Tool Box*, we have made the decision to move out of the repetitive pattern of using the same methods to deal with the old patterns. Having new tools will help this process.

Understanding the root of a problem can give us the information we need to choose the correct tool and find the best solution. It is important to realize that, when we are looking for new solutions, we are focusing on future decisions and situations. The only thing we can hope to affect and change is the future.

## **The Mechanic**

### *Parents: Rights and Responsibilities*

Parenting is a hard job. It may be one of the most difficult, yet rewarding, challenges that we will encounter. We parent in the midst of everything else in our lives: work, aging parents, financial issues, and health concerns. There are many demands on our lives. Parents can feel confused, guilty, isolated, and

exhausted. In our society, parenting is often unrecognized as the strenuous work that it is.

Adolescence is a time of change—not only for the teenager but for the parent as well. Parenting a teen takes focus, planning, experimentation, reflection, successes and failures, gut instincts, hunches, the ability to listen, limit setting, boundary stretching, love, instruction, patience, support, frustration, respect, flexibility, sharing ... the list is endless.

We want to “be there” for our kids to help them learn and gain control over their own lives. To do so, we need to understand their concerns, worries, and rationale for their choices, and listen to their point of view.

If we assume that the teen years are going to be a nightmare, it can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those who are expecting chaos and upheaval may be preparing themselves to overreact to small missteps. If we continually anticipate the worst from him, think what it does to his self-confidence!

While we are trying to be effective parents, we are struggling, too. We want to understand where our teens are “coming from,” but that does not mean that we will accept or agree with their opinions, choices, and rationalizations. Ideally, working toward this understanding will enable us to communicate more effectively with our teens. If we comprehend their specific situation, we have a better chance of creating a response that is relevant and meaningful to our teen.

As parents, we can:

- *Slow things down.* Avoid being caught up in the immediacy of the moment or the demand of the teenager. Give the situation a chance to cool. It is okay to say, “I can’t talk about this right now” or “Let’s discuss this after dinner.”
- *Listen first, talk second.* Learn to listen first. Before we respond with advice or comments, ask, “Is that everything you want to tell me?”
- *Feel hypocritical.* Just because *we* did “something” as a teen does not mean that we have to accept or support the same activity for our teen. We can give ourselves permission to make different choices.
- *Postpone a potentially difficult situation.* When we, or our teen, are tired, small issues can ignite enormous feelings. Know when not to engage in a potentially difficult conversation. Explain feelings of fatigue and the desire to wait.

- *Call other parents.* Confirming plans and checking on supervision are completely acceptable parental behaviors.
- *Cry.* Our teens can see us experiencing raw emotion. This may help them understand the complexity of emotions.
- *Separate our troubles from our teen's trouble.* Notice where our bad day ends and where our teen's bad day begins. If we are unable to keep our moods and issues separate, we may sabotage conversations.
- *Respect, support, and enjoy our kids.* Find the good in them. (Sometimes we may have to look very hard!) Show him respect and he will learn respect.
- *Spend one-on-one time.* Studies show that kids really care about what we think (even though they may never show it). Our attention reminds a teenager that she is important and that we like her company.
- *Use bribery as a tool.* Bribery works! It can be very useful to help teach consequences. A trade could be something like, "If you do X, then you have earned the right to do Y."
- *Ask for our teen's help.* Let her have an area of expertise. When we give her the opportunity to be good at something, it will feed her self-esteem and allow the relationship to grow.
- *Change our mind.* We do not have to fear being inconsistent occasionally. Sometimes this is a sign of our strength and not our weakness. Being able to take in new information and reevaluate a situation are signs of intelligence.
- *Be open to change.* Notice when the teen and the situation may have changed.
- *Learn new tricks and use improved tools.* It is okay to make a mistake, evaluate it, and then try something new.

## ENDNOTES

1. David Dobbs, "Teenage Brains," *National Geographic* (October 2011).
2. *Ibid.*