

Psychotherapy Newsletter

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Teen Hair Color

Concerned that your child is sporting multi-colored hair? Could be just a creative outlet, which will eventually grow out and have little or no ill effect. If it is accompanied by a change in attitude, friends, piercings, tattoos, substance abuse, eating disorders or cutting, taking a closer look is not just important, but critical.

The most immediate and common parental reaction is to restrict a child's freedom to "hang" with "those" friends and try in various ways to prevent them from moving further down whatever road it is that they are on.

A more useful, and ultimately more

important tact, however, might be to consider what it is that is drawing a child to what appears a rather "dark" path. Could it be there is an unspoken message that we only want to accept or face or acknowledge the parts of you, my child, that fit into what we think is important, wholesome, or good? Could it be that you have so many challenges and conflicts in your own life, that you have lost track of what's going on for them? Have you been unfairly taking out your stress on your child? Is your parenting style one that attempts to help your child "rid" themselves of negative traits by drawing attention to them and telling them the "right" way to be?

It's quite possible that the family environment and messages have created a dynamic where the only place the child feels understood, at least their confused, shadowy parts, is by other children that

also feel misunderstood or isolated. Wholeness, being understood, feeling accepted, are things we all long for in life. If all my parts aren't accepted and understood at home, then, in my efforts toward wholeness and individuation, I will seek to be understood elsewhere, and particularly perhaps by those that possess the very dark, confused parts I find hard or impossible to find acceptance for in my home.

This choice to seek acceptance with others who are also struggling presents children with another dilemma: I want to feel understood, but, on some level, I don't really want to see myself as fully identified with another who is down and out and a loner or fitting in solely due to their pushing against all that is acceptable. There are some parts of my relationship with my family and the values they possess that I like. The level of pressure and stress that a child endures as they try to make sense of the splits in themselves can build to an



unbearable magnitude. These intense feelings can increase their tendency to turn to substance abuse (to medicate the pain), loud, angry music (with a message and beat that aligns with their confusion), or cutting themselves (in order to attempt to make confusing feelings more concrete and within their control).

What is the healthiest road for a parent to take in such a situation? Perhaps it might be to work to create, at home, a place where these confusing parts of your child have a voice. An acceptance from you, the parent, that encourages them to explore, identify, and verbalize their struggles. This is a very difficult task for most parents, as our natural inclination is to "fix" it, minimize it, believe it doesn't exist, wish it would go away or be so overcome with anxiety that we are not in any shape to even be in the same room with our child, much less establish a meaningful dialogue. To posture yourself to elicit a relaxed, meandering conversation down a path you despise and feel enormously threatened by is a huge challenge.

How can we create such an opportunity for this type of conversation? If we try too hard, they see us coming a mile away. If they are burned out on preaching, lectures and helpful "hints" about the right way, then they will be particularly suspicious and closed off. The best place to start might be time together. No agenda, no forced conversation, just an activity or outing you both have an interest in. It may be just sitting together in the same room watching television in a casual, relaxed, non-lecturing manner.

Depending on how defended your child is, your strategy will vary. Start slow, with just minimum but positive connection, and work from there. If you are able to engage your child fairly easily in conversation, you might ask them to tell you about an outing or friend they just spent time with. Even though it might be an activity or friend that you would rather they avoid, ask neutral, non-agenda laden questions and stay open to however they reply. Keep the conversation going by asking more non-threatening, non-judging questions. Seek to understand. Find out what draws them to these activities and leave it at that. Know that you have initiated the "integration" process. Rather than sharing good parts with you (or no parts if things have gotten pretty bad between you) and the confusing parts with others, they may find that they are finally beginning to feel comfortable to bring all their parts to you, something they have wished they could do all along. Remember that you, as a parent, are (hopefully) the safest and wisest person for them to sort through their parts with. No one has their best interest at heart and the depth of love for them as you do.

Another thing to keep in mind, if one of your values as a family includes a belief in God, is that your modeling as parents, willing to embrace all parts of your child, develops a template for your

child's budding sense of how a loving God might also view and embrace them.

In cases where your child's behavior is life threatening, then, of course, appropriate responses might include calling the police and/or seeking the necessary help to assure their safety.

If you find it impossible to open the door to this suggested type of relating and that your's or your child's defenses kick into action too quickly, then the aide of a therapist might be helpful. A therapist can provide the child with a more neutral and inviting environment in which to open up, and parents with support and modeling to change the mood and communication style within the home.

The key, it seems, is that every human being seeks to be heard, understood, and accepted. If that is not the norm in your home, then learning how to create an environment where that is occurring is critical, so that your child's hair color is just a sign of creativity, not a desperate cry for help.

For further information, contact Piper Glasier, LCSW, at 949-443-2222. Private Practice Office is located at 28202 Cabot Road, Suite 300, in Laguna Niguel, CA 92677 (near Crown Valley exit off 5 Freeway)