

ADOLESCENCE

Interview with H. SPENCER BLOCH, MD

“ADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGY”

Interviewed by Barbara ALEXANDER, LCSW, BCD

(Edited slightly for readability)

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Welcome to ON GOOD AUTHORITY. I'm Barbara Alexander.

Until recently, the notion of adolescence as a turbulent, tumultuous period of emotional upheaval was both influential and pervasive. Then the work of Dr. Daniel Offer and his colleagues in the late seventies challenged that belief and their findings indicated that most adolescents are neither alienated nor anguished.

Still, passage through the adolescent years continues to take an increasing toll on the mental health of teenagers and their parents. Today's adolescents are experiencing more diverse and difficult societal challenges on top of their developmental stresses.

The main developmental task of adolescence – the establishing of one's identity – presents some real mine fields for therapists. First of all, if there's anything adolescents do NOT want, it's having a grown-up judge their behavior or give them advice. Second, if there's anything an adolescent cannot stand, it's regression and anything that even suggests that.

This places special importance on the therapeutic relationship and one way or another, all our speakers address this issue, whether in the context of psychodynamic, solution-focused, family, or cognitive/behavioral treatment.

The first clinical interview is the cornerstone of all work with adolescents. And especially with angry, acting-out, resistant teenagers, if you don't engage them in the very first session, you won't get another chance.

In this interview, with noted adolescent psychiatrist, H. Spencer Bloch, you will hear a different paradigm for understanding adolescent psychopathology. Rather than an expression of rebellion against the parents, adolescent acting out is often a way of actually complying with the underlying wishes of the parents. By reconciling recent clinical findings on adolescent development with well-established tenets of psychodynamic theory, Dr. Bloch gives us a new view for understanding how psychopathology develops during adolescence, and thus how therapeutic interventions can be directed.

Now to our interviews.

H. Spencer Bloch has spent the last 25 years of his career practicing psychoanalysis and psychiatry in San Rafael, California, and consulting with therapists and with staffs of non-profit treatment agencies and special education schools. He is certified in the psychoanalysis of children, adolescents, and adults and is board certified in general psychiatry and in child and adolescent psychiatry. His book, Adolescent Development, Psychopathology, and Treatment has been characterized as "the definitive text on adolescence."

ALEXANDER: Dr. Bloch, what I'd like to start out by asking is sort of a general question. It's so much the thought that adolescence is a miserable time when everybody is unhappy and families are unhappy, and kids are unhappy. Do you think adolescence really has to be difficult and troubled?

BLOCH: Well, Barbara, that's the interesting question. It's one that's always, I think, on everybody's mind. Actually we know from research data that adolescence does not have to be difficult. And, in fact, for a number of youngsters, it really isn't difficult, certainly, at least, on the surface. And as you know, the best known research demonstrating that came from your area

of the country. It came from Chicago, and it was the work of the Offers, who demonstrated that amongst a group of average and normal high school boys, roughly twenty-five percent of them seem to go right through adolescence without any difficulties at all. The rest of them went through with varying degrees of turmoil, or difficulty, but this whole group was normal. So, even those who had some difficulties or behavioral disturbances or halts and starts eventually turned out okay, in their particular study. So, it does not have to be a time of difficulty.

On the other hand, there also have been studies which have suggested that a number of adolescents are feeling quite uncomfortable inside themselves, but nobody, even those close to them -- their teachers and parents -- recognized it. So, the answer to your question is it does not have to be difficult. Some adolescents go through it without any overt difficulty and move on; others do have some difficulty and move on very well; and some get bogged down.

ALEXANDER: I used to think that if a teenager didn't have trouble in Adolescence, that something was not happening. But, I don't think it has to be that way.

BLOCH: Well, I guess you're right and I guess you and I learned about adolescence at the same time, because until the last roughly twenty-five years, *mas o menos*, the notion of adolescent turmoil was really a cornerstone of our understanding of adolescent development. In fact, Anna Freud, the progenitor in the field of child therapy, child treatment, and child analysis for that matter, said just what you said: that some manner of turmoil/ distress was expectable, and it was more normal to have some turmoil, than not to have turmoil.

But, I think in the last twenty-five years or so, a number of events and changes and initiatives have dominated the field of child work: the Offer's research; new findings in epidemiology and neurobiology; and the advent of the DSMs. In particular, the DSMs are attempting to diagnose conditions very specifically and particularly in part, at least, to be able to find medicinal treatments for them. So all these have led to a reduction of interest in and discrediting or disuse of the developmental model. This model allows more for considering the possibility of conditions which are on the borderline between normal and abnormal, which the old concept of adolescent turmoil seemed to encompass.

ALEXANDER: Well, let's talk about your work and then we can come back to some of the more specifics of "normal vs. pathology," but I think our listeners would really like to hear about your work.

BLOCH: Okay. Well, a model of adolescence development that I've been working from is an ego-oriented maturational model, which emphasizes the importance of three basic issues in adolescents' development. The first is adolescents' internal strivings to complete their development, which is a maturation phenomenon. The second is their need for parental sponsorship of those strivings. And then thus thirdly, a wish to retain a positive relationship with their parents.

In my view, successful emancipation to an adult level of psychological independence can only occur when the adolescents' striving are supported and sponsored by their parents. Now conversely, when adolescents conclude that what's required to please their parents runs counter to their own strivings to move ahead. Then, the developmental process becomes problematic, often in characteristic and predictable ways, and typically, seemingly paradoxically enough, adolescents will tend to sacrifice their own forward movement in favor of gratifying what they have perceived, accurately or not as the underlying wishes of their parents.

Since that last idea runs so counter to the usual view, or the common view of adolescents as being particularly self-centered and rebellious, and that's the norm, let me give a couple of examples that support my persuasion that compliance with what parents seem to really want under the surface sometimes is a much more prominent dynamic in much adolescent psychopathology than has been considered to this point.

As I say, the internal strivings to complete development is really part of the individual's constitution and it's very readily available in all ages and stages in life. I mean we all know how toddlers strive to master walking and talking by repetition and everyone has seen how much young children attempt to accomplish assiduously what their older siblings have already tamed. Certainly in the area of adolescence, the usual or typical adolescent is always trying to arrogate adult privileges and prerogatives and to speak and insist and demand their rights to regulate everything in their lives without parental involvement, even though, they don't feel quite willing or ready to take on parental responsibilities. So this concept -- strivings to

complete development -- is something which really runs through development and you can see it through all ages and stages.

With respect to the goal of wanting to maintain a positive relationship with one's parents, we certainly know that children's sense of security is so dependent on their parents that the children are motivated to please them above all else. Adolescents retain this need while also striving to complete their development and that particular urge becomes intensified by puberty as well as by society's expectations, and for this reason adolescence becomes the period during development when conflict is most likely to occur normally between these streams of development. When it does occur, when the adolescent does experience some conflict between what they feel they need to be doing and what their parents seem to wish of them, it's very important at that time that the parents be able to offer them support or sponsorship of their efforts and desires to move ahead.

I guess the only thing in terms of an example or demonstration of the importance of sponsorship, the one that immediately comes to my mind since many of us were watching the Olympics recently were studies that have been done by sport psychologists of Olympic athletes. Apparently what Olympic athletes say is that the support and encouragement of their parents was the number one thing that the athletes felt got them to that level of competition, and we also hear that in the interviews over the television of Olympic athletes too. It's not just a prosaic example of the importance of parental sponsorship in helping adolescents achieve their goals.

ALEXANDER: I came across an example in your book about a teenage girl of teenage sex equaling compliance with parental needs. The example is of the sixteen year old girl whose parents suspected their daughter of sexual involvement with her male friends. Their suspicions were unfounded and the girl was not sexually active but her parents continued to criticize her rather than trust her, and the girl eventually concluded that what pleased her parents was to actually be able to put her down. So she became sexually active then to please them.

BLOCH: Without any enjoyment on her part or wish, she put herself in compromising circumstances where her parents in this particular situation would be able feel morally superior and righteous and continue to condemn her. Yes, I think that that's certainly one example of the compliant behavior that I'm talking about.

When conflict does occur between the adolescent's wishes to move ahead developmentally and feeling that that runs contrary with what their parent's wish of them, then several attitudes or feelings or reactions seem to occur in the adolescents which determine or are often significant in the resulting aberrant behaviors and symptoms. The first of these feelings or reactions is that adolescents tend to blame themselves when their relationship with their parents goes awry. Now, that again seems surprising because we often see the opposite and that is, in fact, the case. Often the self blame is defended against, or warded off by either reversal -- acting blameless, or by externalizing -- by blaming the parents.

The second feature of the typical reaction is that the adolescents feels responsible for dealing with the relationship, making it better, or doing something about it. And the third feature is that they feel often that they have a great deal of power or influence over their parents in these regards.

The aberrant behavior symptoms which often arise in response to that are either compliances with what the adolescent has perceived or concluded are the underlying wishes of the parents, or they can be what I call "defensive identifications:" imitative behaviors imitating a parent who is failing or floundering. The classic or the typical example of that would be the high school boy who starts to fail in school after his father loses his job.

Just to kind of keep things in order, let me just go back and give now a couple of kinds of examples similar to the one you just made about the girl who felt she had to comply with her parents' wish to feel morally superior to her. Let me give a more mild kind of example, and then one which is quite egregious just to make the point of the spectrum which is involved: an adolescent boy, now fifteen, who'd been struggling through junior high school or at least had never been performing very well academically, desultory performance, a few moments of relative brilliance and most of the time not getting his work done or his work in, and felt to be intelligent, getting along reasonable well in other areas of his life, but just not quite cutting the mustard the way he should have been able to. He came in one day in the earlier years of high school and he is fifteen, and he was trying to understand the word "hypocrisy," and he wondered if this particular example that he had fit the definition or the understanding of "hypocrisy," and he said that when he brings home the poor grades, or mediocre grades that he brought home, his mother would always be lecturing him for an hour about

that. That had become the rule, because he didn't bring home anything but poor grades. Yet, when he recently brought home very good grades for the first time, his mother said, "That's nice," and passed it off without thought, and he wondered why it was that she hasn't been as enthusiastic about his good performance as she had been critical in harping about his poor performance.

Now, if this can represent a paradigm of the mother's attitude toward the youngster in this typical regard, we can see -- I don't think it's too much of a stretch of the imagination -- to see that a child could conclude that, maybe not accurately, but it would be a logical and reasonable thing for the child to conclude was that what gratified his mother was being able to criticize him rather than to be able to praise him.

Here's another one where you see this kind of double whammy: a young man -- now we are getting chronologically past adolescence but not a psychologically -- a young man had been accepted to a fine law school but couldn't get himself to matriculate, to go ahead and get started in it. It turns out that his own father had been a talented lawyer, though quite self-defeating and somewhat paranoid, who controlled his son most autocratically, was highly critical, was impetuous, often cruel. He frequently humiliated this young man as a boy, sometimes beat him capriciously for inconsequential matters, and the father always had to be right.

Although the father insisted that this young man become a lawyer, the father belittled any achievement that this young man made in his preparations to follow in his father's footsteps. For example, when this young man once brought home from college a set of the highest marks that had ever apparently been achieved there in some pre-law courses, his father looked at them and said that he was going to have to teach his son how to write the English language!

Now, it seems to me that you don't have to be Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, or Dick Tracy to see that this father had some objection to the young man moving ahead, despite his protestations to the contrary and his insistence that the son follow the father's footsteps. So, like in *The Glass Menagerie*, when the mother used to say, "Rise and shine," he said "I'll rise, but I won't shine," this young man was complying, not defying his father's stated wishes when he basically failed.

This particular young man's mother was chronically depressed and hypochondriacal and she basically used to cling to the young man in several kinds of ways. She particularly worried so much that things that were not going well for her son, that again, the son began to feel after awhile that suffering on his part made her feel better. She had nothing good to say about any girl that he brought home, and when the father became ill for a while, she employed him to leave college at that point and to stay and take care of her. So, here again, we see from the other side of it, from the highly critical side, the young man concludes the father does not want him to succeed. From the clinging side on the mother, he gets the idea that it is not alright for him to move ahead, move out, and move on to a life of his own or a woman of his own, and point in fact, he did not or could not.

This last example, the last part of this example where he himself acted depressed, and seemed down and worried represented the other paradigmatic situation that I suggested, and that is what I call "a defensive identification" and an imitation with the maladaptive aspects of the parent who seems to be floundering.

As I mentioned briefly, I think a typical example that many of your listeners probably have seen is a young kid who starts to fail when their parent starts to have a problem. That is because it is very important for the child growing up to be able to feel that they can count on their parent because, as I said before, their sense of security is based upon being able to have the parent be stronger and better. So frequently, what we see happening is when we see a parent start to flounder, the adolescent will posture themselves "beneath" the parent so they can say, "I'm not better than my parent, I'm not superior to my parent, I'm not stronger than my parent. Either I'm just like my parent or my parent is stronger than me."

Let me just give you one brief example of that, okay? I got a phone call from a man who had gotten my name out of the phone book. It was about his daughter after she had been suspended from middle school for rudeness to the teacher. She was out four days. He went on to say that that she was assaultive at home, she tears things up on their deck, she hits a sliding glass door because it is getting in her way, or things aren't just the way she thinks they should be. She was explosive and he had had to call the police more than a few times because of her behavior. She was 10 or 11, a middle school child. This father felt that she may have been a danger to herself and to him,

and in fact, she had assaulted him a few times and is totally out of control at times. Other than calling police or counseling, he didn't know what he could do.

So, I said, "Look, how long has she been behaving this way?" He said, "Five months." Before that, he said everything was fine. She followed the house rules, a few problems in school, but nothing out of the ordinary. I said, "Well, what happened five months ago?" He said, almost in an ashamed or embarrassed tone, "Well, her mother was incarcerated at a women's state prison for violent felonies, assault, burglary, and assault with a deadly weapon." And then he went right on to say that his daughter has friends who treat their parents the same way. They curse them and they get their way and the kids are controlling their parents, and his daughter has seen that. In other words, he moved immediately away from the mother as a possible source of this to peer relationships.

So, I said, "You know, I'd guess this has a lot to do with the mother's incarceration. Now, how did she react to that? He said that she didn't show much" reaction, though he went on to say that he had divorced her mother during this incarceration of the mother and the girl had felt considerable anxiety and worry about the mother after that. Then he went on to tell me that his daughter was arrested for burglary and was taken overnight to a juvenile hall and her attitude was, "So what?"

Well, again, I think it is not too great a stretch of the psychological imagination to feel that this youngster's imitative behavior of her parent, the equivalent behaviors of her mother, were related to some concern about her mother's welfare.

Now, typically and traditionally, Barbara, this idea of identification with a parent -- identification with the aggressor in this point -- was seen in classical analytical psychology as basically a way of retaining an object relationship in the object's absence. I don't dispute that this may be there, but I see this kind of phenomenon more in adolescence as an effort to build up and buoy up a parent about whom they are worried. Adolescents do not like or want to worry about their parents. Let me stop there now. I think these examples kind of cover both the paradigmatic behavioral symptom situations that I find in adolescent psychopathology.

ALEXANDER: To what extent would the adolescent be conscious of what

they are doing. In other words, the girl who is acting out sexually to allow her parents to be able to continue to blame her, feel superior to her -- would she be aware of that as a motivation? Would the younger girl be aware that she is acting in this way to somehow support her father? The young prelaw student -- well, he would be older and certainly able to see the motivation more clearly, but what do you think? How conscious are the kids of this stuff?

BLOCH: Well, I think I have found in my clinical experience, there is a spectrum of awareness and insipient awareness. In the case of the girl in the sexually acting out, when pointed out to her, she was able to see that. A number of adolescents, especially mid and later adolescents can or will pick up on it quite readily.

The younger adolescent girl or prepubertal, I never did see that girl as you might have anticipated. Father canceled the appointment he had made to come in and see me and said he would reschedule and never did, so I didn't ever have follow up on that.

Some of these youngsters do not see it at all and even when it is pointed out to them, they have a hard time accepting it, but more often than not, in adolescence when it is pointed out to them, they seem to be able to use it. Now, with individuals like the pre-law student, especially in backgrounds which have been particularly severe with regard to the engendering of these kinds of resultant conditions, often they can see the issue, the wisdom, the accuracy of it. It certainly helps them, it is relieving, but the working through process of doing this gets to be long in some of the cases.

ALEXANDER: Sure, just knowing it doesn't change it.

BLOCH: Isn't sufficient, no. But you have to keep being able to show it to them in every single aspect and nook and cranny of their life. These people can be helped and they do get better, especially if you can pick up on it in the adolescent years.

ALEXANDER: Let me go to something more specific. When you are conducting an assessment of an adolescent, is there a generally symptomatic way in which you approach the interview? For instance, do you see the parent first or the child first? How do you approach the clinical assessment?

BLOCH: Well, as I pointed out, my thesis has to do with the continually unfolding nature of the developmental process -- that is, that development in adolescence is a progressive process. I am most interested in trying to dovetail into that process. Since I think that the outcome of the process is the adolescent's achievement of an age appropriate adult level of psychological autonomy, that is, freedom from pervasive influence of others on their freedom of choice in terms of all values and ways of thinking and feeling, I'm trying to support or find a way of supporting the adolescent's autonomy from the get-go when I usually get the call from a parent.

Thus, this approach bespeaks, I suppose, the wisdom, or at least my tendency to try to see the adolescent from at least the age of 12 or 13 on before I see the parents. Certainly from adolescents older than that, I urge that. But, also, I want the adolescent to have some say or sense about that and sometimes a younger child as well, who, I sense from what the parent tells me, is struggling with issues that have to do with independence or who feels that when they were sent to a therapist from their school, that the therapist was the agent of the school or the parents. I want to try to help them see from the beginning that this is an experience for them.

So, when a parent of a 12 or 13 year old calls, I ask the parent, first what is their view of the situation in terms of should they be seen first, but second, I say, "Would you please ask your son or daughter which way they want to do it? Would they be willing to come in first and see me or do they want you [the parent] to come ahead to give me background data?" and I would follow their lead. If possible, I see the adolescent first.

Then, in terms of how I conduct the assessment, well, you know, it's never as systematic as I would hope it would be. But, there are certain specific kinds of things that I would be looking for. The first is to get some understanding of the adolescent's adaptive style, his or her strengths and relative vulnerabilities prior to adolescence. So, it becomes helpful to get an idea of what they were like during what conventionally or typically has been called "the latency period."

Now, this is not unlike what other therapists have been inclined to do. Traditional analysts, Peter Blos, for example, would be doing the same kinds of thing. But he would be focusing on the strengthening on the ego's defensive capacities to deal with the upsurge of drive of puberty, whereas

I'm looking more for their adaptive capacities and strategies in terms of being able to deal with their outside world as well as their inside life.

So, as I say, it is helpful to determine whether an adolescent's presentation is basically different from, or essentially a new form of his or her prior adaptive style. That is because, if the old style worked well enough, then one might be less concerned about an age appropriate version of the same, as opposed to if it were a radical departure from the youngster's previous style, then there may, but not necessarily be, more reason for concern. Certainly, we have seen some youngsters that changed dramatically at adolescence and it doesn't necessarily mean that it is pathological.

Let me just give you an example, though, of the first situation. I'm thinking about a little boy who, oh, in say third grade or so, was looked upon amusedly by his teachers as "a little professor" because of precocious vocabulary and a tendency for intellectual explanations. This tendency became more pronounced in middle school when he began contending with his teachers. Then as a young teenager, his style of dealing with his parents was relentless argumentation, sometimes specious, but often logical or logical enough, as I understood it. It was also persistent, though, until he got his way or until he could accept the logic behind his parents' refusal of his wishes. Then, as a guitar playing mid-adolescent, he had adopted the hair style, that is, the long hair, the torn clothing dress, the language, and the manner of heavy metal rock musicians that he had admired and he was a decent enough musician himself. As part of that adolescent rocker persona, he became even more strident in confronting his parents, his teachers and his peers. But, this long time adaptive mode and intellectual argumentativeness was altered stylistically by his vociferousness and his vulgarity, but on the other hand, he didn't take up the drug or alcohol using ways of those rock stars he admired or of his friends who shared his interests in music. So, although he now looked and sounded very different from the little nerd he was prior to adolescence, his basic ways of dealing with the world and with himself, namely intellectually-based argumentative confrontation, they had altered more superficially than substantively. And, since they had worked okay for him, and since he didn't seem to be falling into any vast holes even though his grades were not that great at the time that he was using his music to work himself through the adolescent issues, there was reason to feel that he did not need to be treated for his falling school performance, which never really bottomed out by any means. The last I heard about him, he was headed for law school!

ALEXANDER: (laughs) Perfect.

BLOCH: So, there's an example of the importance of trying to get some idea about whether we are dealing with old vinegar in new bottles, or whether we are dealing with a new kind of vinegar. So, that is one of the things I am trying to determine when I see the adolescent. And, part and parcel of this as well is getting some sense of their ego strengthening prior to adolescence, and here we are interested in how they are able to control their impulses. Have they integrated obsessional defenses adequately, especially reaction formation, because we are particularly concerned with control of aggressive impulses in our day and age, not just the sexual ones.

And then, the capacity that this individual has exhibited prior to adolescence to sublimate. As you know, this is usually most typically assessed by determining how well they have acquired the tools of precision learning and their ability to persist at learning tasks. Now, this doesn't necessarily equate with school grades, but you know, if grades were mediocre, then frustration tolerance becomes more important as you think about the demands made academically in high school and adolescence.

Then, another factor which I think is extremely important is some sense of whether they have any particular skills or any particular talents or interests that they have developed, because these can represent ego assets upon which the adolescents may be able to capitalize as they work their way through adolescence. Forty or fifty years ago, you can see these young adolescent boys or mid adolescent boys who would work their way through adolescence by building up cars and taking them down, building up, taking them down. Well, there are a lot of other ways too, but things like music, as in the example of the last youth that I mentioned, or certainly athletics and sports are often things that adolescents can devote themselves to during adolescence which they like, they enjoy, they work to get better at so that even if their grades, for example, aren't the best, their developmental movement is still forward, progressive because they are increasing their abilities and capacities, their self-esteem regulation as they get good at doing something, and that is important, as it seems to me. It is part of ego strengthening.

I think you have to think about conscience functioning as well, prior to adolescence and that is often assessed from such as things as the degree to

which the child was able to differentiate or live with a sense of right or wrong, their ability as they hit adolescence to be able to play by the rules without much auxiliary ego support in every area. Certainly a history of delinquent behavior sometimes gives one a cause for pause.

A next area is peer relatedness. A strong peer relationship during grade school years represents a precursor experience for estimating an adolescent's ability to use peer relationships to facilitate their emancipation, and we know that that is very commonly done -- in other words, the adolescent turning to the peer group.

Then, I'm interested in getting a sense of whether the current thrust of the adolescent's development is forward moving, in other words, trying to assess the immediate state of his or her striving to complete their development. How does one do that? Well, it's always something of a guess and judgment call, but are they trying to feel increasingly independent of the need for parental guidance or influence with respect to managing their impulses? Are they moving toward adopting a personal moral code, not exclusively dependent upon that of their parents' standards? Are they trying to maintain forward momentum in their learning, and if it is not school learning, in learning something which is at least a reasonable and decent skill? And are they formulating an increasingly appropriate course for the next period of their lives, one which is based on probabilities rather than possibilities of success? And are they taking increasing responsibility for achieving that goal?

A 16-year old patient who had been struggling, among other things, with illicit drug use told me that one day that what she really would like to do now, and feels it would be reasonable for her to do is to move to a house on the top of a hill with her nere-do-well boyfriend where she would learn to play the guitar so she could be in a rock band. At the same time, she would hold a job, and she thought that she would probably like to have a child or two as well at the same time -- not highly realistic motivations or goals to be occurred at one time for someone who was not able to take very good care of herself. In other words, you would be assessing whether they are looking in a realistic way toward situations in the next stage of their life where they will have probabilities rather than possibilities of success.

ALEXANDER: Going back to the argumentative boy who then went on to

become a lawyer, am I right in understanding that you felt that this boy did not need treatment? Was that right? So, then you would say to the parents, what? “You just have to live with it” or ... ?

BLOCH: Okay, I say, “Over and above his disinclination to be treated at this point, which we may not be able to do anything about -- in other words, I don’t know whether at that age we would be able to force him into treatment -- I would say that I think what we can do is we can treat the situation with some watchful waiting.” I would point out to them, to the adolescents themselves, the sense rather than the nonsense of his behaviors, and the evidences that development was still progressive at this point, rather than stalled or stuck. And I urge them, if they have any questions or concerns at any point along the way, to feel free to pick up the phone and give me a call and we can always reassess the situation at that time.

I’d say, you know, that I wish I could give them 100% guarantee that things were going to turn out okay. Unfortunately, I cannot do that, but my best clinical judgment at this point is that they should continue to show forbearance. This doesn’t simply mean let him do everything he wants, but try to find ways to let him know that they understand that his preoccupation with music is not simply a bad thing or a dead end, and that they want to try to sponsor and support him in a reasonable kind of way. But they really do have to insist, and it is only fair and reasonable, that he attend his classes in school and be passing his grades now, because he doesn’t want to foreshorten his options for the future.

Now the nice thing about America is that there are unlimited second chances and that really works to the benefit of some of these adolescents who seem to be on a side track during the adolescent years. I don’t know how it is in other parts of the country but certainly, out here there is a good junior college system, which is what many parents think about their children going to where they can start and get into from high school with mediocre grades and then after two years, they can transfer to the more prestigious universities without having lost anything. I mean, it’s a very nice option for youngsters out here who have had trouble keeping their nose to the grindstone the way many parents would hope their kids can during adolescence. Many of these kids turn out perfectly well.

ALEXANDER: I knew of a situation some years back where the girl was

extremely clingy to her mother. They were very close. The father was somewhat oppressive and she and her mother just were so close, got along famously. Then one day when she was about 13, she and her mother were walking across the street and the mother reached out to hold the girl's hand, which they had always done for 13 years, and the girl sort of violently threw her mother's hand down and then launched into a lot of acting out -- climbing out of the windows to meet her boyfriends, etc. This period of acting out lasted well into her 20s. She got pregnant out of wedlock, she married the young man, they divorced. So she went on to have a more turbulent adulthood, but it was always interesting to me how this came about from this closeness to this spinning away.

BLOCH: Yes. What I have often found in such cases, and it may well not be the case here, but as you said, the relationship seemed to be extremely close, almost too close as the girl became a young adolescent. In those kinds of experiences, we are not seeing the normative movement away from the close relationship with the parent, in this case, the mother, and in those situations, what I often find is the child is complying with what she experiences as the mother's need for closeness and she doesn't know how she can be able to pull away from it without hurting the mother and eventually she just kind of has to lurch away in that way, but she can't do it with impunity, she has to do it in such a way that she messes up, so that the mother was still right. You follow me?

ALEXANDER: Yes.

BLOCH: That is the kind of thing I often see in these situations. It is the kind of thing that I look for. In this particular case, the situation was loaded in favor of the mother and the daughter being close because you said that the dad was kind of oppressive and wasn't able to help his daughter be able to move a little bit more easily away from the intensity of the attachment, which I would suspect that the mother had for the daughter. That is where you see that underlying this is a compliance. What looks like rebellious behavior is really not ultimately that; it is an effort to deal with this important issue of the relationship with the parents.

Interestingly enough, that takes me to basically the last part of the assessment and segue as well into it. If the adolescent's development is not progressive, what's impeding it -- and the prototypic way, in my model, in which the adolescent development becomes problematic -- involves a

relationship with the parents and so I try to evaluate that feature. The first things I look for, as I'm sure your listeners will surmise, are these two kind of paradigmatic situations: one, of compliance; or two, of a defensive identification or imitation of a parent. These are often easy to see. They are in quite sharp relief, and that is some indication that there is a problem with being compulsively compliant or defensively identifying. Each of these situations suggests the protection of a parent, or hiding dissatisfaction with a parent, or inhibiting one's own progress because of those attitudes.

The second thing that I look for are prior traumatic experiences involving parents or sibs, which precipitated survivor guilt, that is inhibiting the developmental progression, and that is also easy to identify.

Then, sometimes, I fall back on a scheme of Anna Freud, which I thought has always been a very good way of looking at the adolescent vis a vis their parents. She described these as "defenses against the libidinal object ties." I think they could be equally well thought of as the adolescents' ways of attempting to deal with their wishes to become more independent from their parents, but she described four different defenses: the first was by displacement, and that is when the love for the parent is turned away from the parent but on to someone else, like a teacher, another relative, a friend's mother, someone else. The second is "reversal of affect," and that is when the love for the parents is turned into hate and contempt. The third was withdrawal of libido into kind of a schizoid-type state in which the person withdraws from relatedness to other people, and the fourth was defense by regression, which is moving to a more psychotic state.

Now, these form a continuum of increasingly pathological potential, but none of them, in Anna Freud's view, was in and of itself necessarily pathological – i.e. the intensity, the degree, or the exclusivity with which the adolescent used any of these mechanisms determine whether they are more likely to be adaptive or pathological.

With that, just the schema sometimes helps me understand and also helps when you talk to parents about what may be going on with the child. It may help them in that regard.

Then, basically, you try to synthesize from these elements where the youngster is, whether his or her development is still progressive or is obstructed.

Then there is just one other proviso: with adolescents, always take the long view. In other words, if you subscribe to a model that holds that development is a progressive phenomenon, as do I, then that inclines one generally to have a cautiously optimistic view and approach, which I think is, in general, good anyway. So, we want to look at any acute problem that the adolescent brings in or his parents bring in. In terms of the underlying efforts of the adolescent to move ahead -- and we don't simply want to discount the impediments they are having as self limited -- but at the same kind, we're looking to see how this could fit in to where you think the adolescent needs to be, depending upon their age, when they are in their early 20s and then you make an educated guess and proceed from there.

ALEXANDER: Dr. Bloch, I like very much how you reframe so many things that I have thought about in a different kind of way. I like the different way of looking at some of the behavior as an attempt to please the parent and conform. I really find this extremely interesting and helpful.

BLOCH: Thank you, Barbara.

ALEXANDER: You're very welcome. Is there anything you'd like to add before we stop? I realize we could just talk on and on because the subject of adolescent development, psychopathology, the subject of your book is just such a vast topic. But is there anything else you'd like to add before we close?

BLOCH: Someone said a number of years ago that adolescence weighs heavily upon the American conscious and I don't think that has changed. Certainly we know that the development tasks of adolescence really have not changed for millennia but the avenues for dealing with them have changed to a certain degree to the kind of degrees that make the assessment more worrisome and troublesome because the options today that the adolescents have now -- many of them have shorter thresholds to disaster than the routes that adolescents had years ago.

I am bespeaking the obvious. You know, you can drink an awful lot of more beer before you get to be an alcoholic than you can use crack cocaine before you get to be addicted. The loosening social prohibitions against sexual involvements in adolescence is certainly predisposed to some devastating conditions: unwanted pregnancies amongst young girls; and then of course,

nowadays, the potential for disastrous illness, namely AIDS. These things all render the tasks of therapists who are trying to evaluate adolescents all the more anxiety engendering, but we just have to do the best we can. As I have suggested, you try to use the adolescent himself or herself, their prior life as a kind of control. That helps, in my experience, trying to determine how pathological their reactions may be.

You're right; I can go on and on.

ALEXANDER: Well, Dr. Bloch, I do thank you very much for your time and for this interview.

BLOCH: My pleasure.

Dr. Bloch's book, Adolescent Development, Psychopathology and Treatment, may be ordered from any major bookseller or directly from the International Universities Press, 800-835-3487.

This concludes our interview with H. Spencer Bloch. We hope you have learned from this interview and that you enjoyed it.

I must say here that the views expressed by our speakers are theirs alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of On Good Authority. Until next time, this is Barbara Alexander. Thank you for listening.