

## ***The Science of Teen Rebellion*** **by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman**

Until recently, we didn't really know how often teens lied to parents. The systematic accounting was nonexistent. Most parents have some sense that they're not hearing the whole truth from their teenagers. They fill the information vacuum with equal parts intuition, trust, and fear.

With other uncertainties in life, we have averages to inform a sense of what's normal. When a couple gets married, for instance, they have a 57% chance of seeing their fifteenth wedding anniversary. If you're wondering how long you might live, it's informative to know life expectancy now averages 78 years. Those taking the New York State bar exam for the first time have an 83% chance of passing, and high school seniors applying to Harvard have a 7% chance of being admitted.

Shouldn't we have the equivalent statistics on how much teens lie to (and hide from) their parents?

Drs. Nancy Darling and Linda Caldwell thought so.

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Darling and Caldwell both came to Penn State University around the same time, and naturally took an interest in each other's work. Darling was studying adolescent dating, which teens lie to their parents about routinely. Caldwell was researching a new field called "Leisure Studies," which sounded at first to Darling like a trivial topic, but turned out to be the study of what kids do in their free time. One of the operating theories of Leisure Studies is that adolescents turn to drinking and sex partly because they have a lot of unsupervised free time. They're bored and don't know what else to do. "When you're fourteen, everything's more interesting when you're drunk," remarked Darling.

Darling and Caldwell wondered if they could get high schoolers to cooperate in a study where they'd admit to the very things they were hiding from their parents. Darling recognized that if she sat down with a high-school sophomore, she would be too imposing an authority figure to get the truth. Even her graduate students were too mature to relate to teens and gain their confidence. So she recruited from her undergraduate classes a special research team, all under age 21 – a scholars' Mod Squad.

For the first semester, these eight undergrads met with Darling and were trained in research methods and interview techniques. Then Darling sent them out to the places in State College where teens hang out in public. They handed out flyers at the mall, but they were more successful at night in a little alley off Calder Way, at the back door of the video arcade. They approached teenagers and offered them a gift certificate for a free CD at the local music shop in exchange for being in the study. If the teens agreed, the undergrads took down a phone number.

Darling wanted the first recruits to be the cool kids. "The idea was, if we just went to the school and asked for volunteers, we'd get the goody-two-shoes kids. Then the cool kids wouldn't join the study. We'd be oversampling the well-behaved. But if we got the cool kids, the others would follow." The core of recruits attended State College Area High School, which has 2,600 students. "It became quite the trendy thing at the high school, to be in the study," Darling recalled.

The others did follow, and soon Darling had a representative sample that matched up to national averages on a bevy of statistics, from their grades to how often they drank.

Subsequently, two of the Mod Squad researchers met with each high schooler at a place they'd feel comfortable. Often this was the Four Brothers Pizzeria on Beaver Avenue. Having only a four-dollar budget for each restaurant field trip, all they could do was buy the teen fries and Coke before presenting him with a deck of 36 cards. Each card in this deck described a topic teens sometimes lie to their parents about. Over the next couple hours, the teen and researchers worked through the deck, discussing which issues the kid and his parents disagreed on, and which rules the kid had broken, and how he'd pulled off the deception, and why. Because of their age similarity to their targets, the researchers never had trouble getting the high-schoolers to confide in them. Despite all the students and all the cards in the deck, only once – to a single card – did a student hold back, saying, "I don't want to talk about that."

The deck handed to the teens triggered recognition of just how pervasive their deception went. "They began the interviews saying that parents give you everything and yes, you should tell them everything," Darling observed. By the end of the interview, the kids saw for the first time how much they were lying and how many of the family's rules they had broken. Darling said, "It was something they realized – and that they didn't like about themselves."

Out of 36 potential topics, the average teen lies to her parents about 12 of them. Teens lie about what they spend their allowance on, and whether they've started dating, and what clothes they put on away from the house. They lie about what movie they went to and who they went with. They lie about alcohol and drug use, and they lie about whether they're hanging out with friends their parents disapprove of. They lie about how they spend their afternoons if the parent is still at work. They lie whether a chaperone was in attendance at a party, or whether they rode in a car driven by a drunken teen. Even some things around the house they lie about – whether their homework is done, or what music they're listening to.

"Drinking, drug use, and their sex lives are the things kids hide the most from their parents," Darling noted. "But it wasn't just the sexual acts they were hiding. They really objected to the emotional intrusiveness – being asked, 'How serious is this relationship?' and 'Do you love this person?' The kids just don't want to answer those questions."

Only one-quarter of the time do teens concoct an outright lie to pull off their deception. According to Darling's data, these direct lies are used to cover up the worst stuff. Half the time, teens execute their deception by withholding the relevant details that would upset their parent; the parent hears only half the story. And another quarter of the time, the teen manages the deception by never bringing the topic up at all, hoping the parent won't know to ask.

Rare was the kid who was completely honest with parents: 96% of the teens in Darling's study reported lying to their parents.

Being an honors student doesn't change these numbers by much, according to other research. Nor does being a really busy, overscheduled kid. No kid, apparently, is too busy to break a few rules.

"When I began this research, I would have thought the main reason teens would say they lie was, 'I want to stay out of trouble,'" Darling explained. "But actually the most common reason for

deception was, 'I'm trying to protect the relationship with my parents; I don't want them to be disappointed in me.'"

Darling also mailed survey questionnaires to the parents, and it was interesting how the two sets of data reflected on each other. First, she was struck by parents' vivid fear of pushing their teens into outright rebellion. "Many parents today believe the best way to get teens to disclose is to be more permissive and not set outright rules," Darling said. Parents imagine a tradeoff between being informed and being strict. Better to hear the truth and be able to help than be kept in the dark.

Darling found that permissive parents don't actually learn more about their children's lives. "Kids who go wild and get in trouble mostly have parents who don't set rules or standards. Their parents are loving and accepting no matter what the kids do. But the kids take the lack of rules as a sign their parents don't actually care – that their parent doesn't really want this job of being the parent."

In cooperation with other scholars, Darling has done versions of her study around the world – in the Phillipines, Italy, and Chile. "In Chile, the permissive parent is the norm. And kids lie to their parents there more than anyplace else."

Pushing a teen into rebellion by having too many rules was a sort of statistical myth. "That actually doesn't happen," remarked Darling. She found that most rules-heavy parents don't actually enforce them. "It's too much work," said Darling. "It's a lot harder to enforce three rules than to set twenty rules." These teens avoided rebellious direct conflict and just snuck around behind their parents' backs.

By withholding information about their lives, adolescents carve out a social domain and identity that are theirs alone, independent from their parents or other adult authority figures. According to a recent Harris Poll, 78% of parents were sure their teens could talk to them about anything. However, the teens disagreed.

To seek out a parent for help is, from a teen's perspective, a tacit admission that he's not mature enough to handle it alone. Having to tell parents about it can be psychologically emasculating, whether the confession is forced out of him or he volunteers it on his own. It's essential for some things to be "none of your business."

The big surprise in the research is *when* this need for autonomy is strongest. It's not mild at 12, moderate at 15, and most powerful at 18. Darling's scholarship shows that the objection to parental authority peaks around age 14 to 15. In fact, this resistance is slightly stronger at age 11 than at 18. In popular culture, we think of high school as the risk years, but the psychological forces driving deception surge earlier than that.

A few parents managed to live up to the stereotype of the oppressive parent, with lots of psychological intrusion, but those teens weren't rebelling. They were obedient. And depressed.

"Ironically, the type of parents who are actually most consistent in enforcing rules are the same parents who are most warm and have the most conversations with their kids," Darling observed. They've set a few rules over certain key spheres of influence, and they've explained why the rules are there. They expect the child to obey them. Over life's other spheres, they supported the child's autonomy, allowing her freedom to make her own decisions.

The kids of these parents lied the least. Rather than hiding twelve areas from their parents, they might be hiding as few as five.

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The Mod Squad study did confirm Linda Caldwell's hypothesis that teens turn to drinking and drugs because they're bored in their free time. After the study's completion, Caldwell wondered if there was a way to help kids fend off boredom. Rather than just badgering kids with the message "Don't Do Drugs," wouldn't it be more effective to teach them how else to really enjoy their free time?

So Caldwell went about designing a program, driven by an ambitious question: "Can you teach a kid how not to be bored?"

Her research has shown that boredom starts to set in around seventh grade, and it increases all through twelfth grade. Intrinsic motivation also drops, gradually but consistently, through those same years. So Caldwell aimed her program at seventh graders in their fall semester.

She got nine middle school districts throughout rural Pennsylvania to sign up; over 600 children participated in the study. Teachers from these schools came to Penn State and received training in how to teach anti-boredom.

The program Caldwell created, TimeWise, did every detail right. Rather than some one-day intervention, this was an actual school class that lasted six weeks. Rather than being lectured to, the students enjoyed a workshop vibe, where they discussed their issues, problem-solved, and coached one another. Rather than merely testing these students after the course, Caldwell continued to test the long-term benefits of TimeWise, measuring the students' boredom levels and use of time for the next three years. Every year, the students went through a booster class, to remind them of the principles and encourage them to reapply the lessons to their changing lives.

The course began with a self-examination module. The students learned the difference between being generally bored, all day long, and being situationally bored, be it when in history class or when sitting on the couch at home, watching reruns. They learned to recognize the difference in their own motivation: "Am I doing this because I actually want to, or because my mom signed me up and I have to, or because I feel pressured by friends to follow along?" They spent the first week filling out time diaries, charting how they spent their time and how engaged they felt doing it all.

The researchers saw that it wasn't just kids with lots of free time who were bored. Even the really busy kids could be bored, for two reasons. First, they were doing a lot of activities only because their parents signed them up – there was no intrinsic motivation. Second, they were so accustomed to their parents filling their free time that they didn't know how to fill it on their own. "The more controlling the parent," Caldwell explained, "the more likely a child is to experience boredom."

The students spent a lot of time learning how to counter peer pressure. They went on to do a module on flow, based on the ideas of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and did a module on understanding how the element of risk made something exciting or scary. They learned to see themselves as architects of their own experience.

When I first read of Caldwell's TimeWise, I felt jealous – I wished there had been such a program for me in seventh grade. The program was so exciting that it was simultaneously reproduced in South Africa, where children have very little to do, and it's not being reproduced in school districts in Oregon, Utah, and urban Pennsylvania. The California Parks and Recreation Society put TimeWise on the top of its list of role models for leisure education programs.

There's been only one problem. The kids came out of the class charged up, but by the end of spring, they weren't dramatically different from kids who hadn't taken the TimeWise class. "The results dissipated after the initial intervention," Caldwell noted. "You always wish for stronger results. We got some nice results, but they haven't lasted across the four years." It's really been a mystery why this great class didn't have a huge impact.

Note that her results have statistical significance; Caldwell published them in a prestigious journal and has continued to receive grants for TimeWise. But from an ordinary person's perspective, the results lack any "wow" factor. Compared to students not in the class, measureable boredom went down only about 3%. TimeWise students were only meagerly better at avoiding peer pressure, and they didn't join more clubs. Though they played sports a little more and spent more time outdoors, their intrinsic motivation was no better than regular students. These kids weren't drinking alcohol a lot – during ninth grade, they'd drank only a couple times that year, on average – but there was almost no difference on that score between the kids in the TimeWise program and the kids who weren't. The smoking of pot and cigarettes was also almost indistinguishable between the two groups.

For the seventh-graders who started out most bored, "it didn't seem to make a difference," said Caldwell. It turns out that teaching kids not to be bored is really hard – even for the best program in the country.

Why didn't TimeWise have a stronger effect?

Is it possible that teens are just neurologically prone to boredom?

According to the work of neuroscientist Dr. Adriana Galvan at UCLA, there's good reason to think so. Inside our brains is a reward center, involving the nucleus accumbens, which lights up with dopamine whenever we find something exciting or interesting or pleasurable. In a study comparing the brains of teens to the brains of adults and young kids, Galvan found that teen brains can't get pleasure out of doing things that are only mildly or moderately rewarding.

Galvan's experiment was quite ingenious. She had kids, teens, and adults play a pirate video game while *inside* an fMRI scanner, with their heads restrained. Their arms were free to push buttons. With each successful turn of the game, they won some gold – on the screen flashed either a single gold coin, a small stack of coins, or a jackpot pile of gold.

Young kids find any sort of reward thrilling, so their brains lit up the same amount, no matter how much gold they won. Adult brains lit up according to the size of the reward: single coin, small pleasure response; big pile, big pleasure response. The teen brains did not light up in response to winning the small or medium reward – in fact, the nucleus accumbens activity dipped *below* baseline, as if they were crestfallen. Only to the big pile of gold did their reward center light up – and then it *really* lit up, signaling more activity than kids or adults ever showed.

Galvan noted that the response pattern of teen brains is essentially the same response curve of a seasoned drug addict. Their reward center cannot be stimulated by low doses – they need the big jolt to get pleasure.

But that wasn't all that Galvan saw happening in teen brains. Their prefrontal cortex seemed to be showing a diminished response whenever their reward center was experiencing intense excitement. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for weighing risk and consequences. Explaining this, Galvan said it was as if the pleasure response was "hijacking" the prefrontal cortex. At the very moment when experiencing an emotionally-charged excitement, the teen brain is handicapped in its ability to gauge risk and foresee consequences.

In abstract situations, teens can evaluate risks just like adults. Given a scenario, they can list the pros and cons, and they can foresee consequences. But in exciting real-life circumstances, this rational part of the brain gets overridden by the reward center.

All this fits the pattern we see in the real world, where adolescents seem sluggish in literature class, drink like fish on Saturday nights, and don't seem to realize it's a bad idea to put five friends on a golf cart while driving it down a steep hill with a sharp turn at the bottom.

Not all adolescents are primed like this. Galvan had her subjects fill out questionnaires that assessed how often they participated in certain risky behaviors in their own lives. She also asked them whether certain risk behaviors sounded like fun – getting drunk, shooting fireworks, vandalizing property – or sounded merely dangerous. How they answered the questionnaires matched their neurological results: those who said risky behavior sounded like fun also had higher spikes in their brain's reward center when they won the pile of gold in the pirate video game.

The neuroscience of risk-taking is a very advanced field, but it doesn't offer many solutions; some teens are wired to take big risks, done deal. The mechanics of this brain wiring include a reduction in the density of dopamine receptors, which makes teens unable to enjoy mild rewards, and a simultaneous spurt in oxytocin receptors, which makes them highly attuned to the opinions of their peers. Surrounded by friends, they'll take stupid chances, just for the thrill.

If there's hope in this science, it comes from the few scholars who recognize that teens are only *sometimes* huge risk takers. In fact, there are all sorts of risks that terrify teens *far more* than adults. The risk of asking a girl to a dance, and getting turned down, has frozen millions of boys every year from taking that chance. Teens are so self-conscious of appearances that they'll wait until Christmas break to get haircuts. They feel all eyes are upon them when they raise their hand in class. They think it's risky to show up at school wearing a new shirt nobody's seen before. In many cases, the fear of embarrassment turns teens into weenies.

A series of experiments by Dr. Abigail Baird at Vassar captured this dichotomy perfectly. She put teens in an MRI scanner, then asked them to decide if certain concepts were a good idea or a bad idea. The good ideas were pleasantly mundane, such as "eating a salad," or "walking the dog." The bad ideas were grisly:

*Bite down on a lightbulb*  
*Swallow a cockroach*  
*Light your hair on fire*  
*Jump off a roof*

## *Swim with sharks*

When adults took this test, they answered virtually instantaneously. Their brain scans revealed that adults visualized the concept of biting a lightbulb, and then had an instinctive, physical aversion to that mental image. Areas of the brain that signal distress and danger lit up, automatically.

When teens took the test, they didn't answer differently (they didn't think swallowing a cockroach was a good idea), but it took them longer to answer. Their brain scans revealed no automatic response, nor any distress; instead, they were weighing the decision in the cognitive parts of the brain, with deliberation, as if they were momentarily agonizing over which college to attend. "They were actually *thinking* about it," Baird laughed. "They weren't *feeling* it." They didn't have painful past experiences to draw upon. Swimming with sharks simply didn't scare them.

How many times have parents said to their teens, "Why did you have to try it? Didn't you know it was a bad idea?!" Actually, the teen brain can think abstractly, but not *feel* abstractly – at least not until it's had more life experience to draw on. And *feeling* like it's a bad idea is what it would take to stop oneself from doing it.

But then Baird put some teens through another experiment. The video screen inside the MRI scanner showed a web site that was polling local teens on their opinions and tastes. The subjects created a pseudonymous user name and password to log in. They were told that they were online with other teens in the Upper Valley of New Hampshire. The poll questions were unremarkable – what style of music they liked, whether they thought Paris Hilton was cool, what local stores they shopped at. After each question, one teen's answer (and user name) would randomly display to all.

As they worked through the poll, the teens in Baird's lab did not have their answers displayed to others. In fact, there were no other teens taking the poll – that was just the pretense to scare them. And scare them it did. Just the mere *possibility* of having their preferences displayed to this imaginary audience vibrantly lit up the regions of the brain that signal distress and danger.

That's the teen brain at fifteen in a nutshell – fearless to jumping off roofs, but terrified of having its love of Nickelback exposed. Might there be a way to harness the latter to minimize the former?

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In the dictionary, the antonym of honesty is lying, and the opposite of arguing is agreement. But in the minds of teenagers, that's not how it works. Really, to an adolescent, arguing is the opposite of lying.

That's cryptic, so let me unpack what I mean.

When Nancy Darling's researchers interviewed the teenagers from State College Area High School, they also asked the teens when and why they told the truth to their parents about things they knew their parents disapproved of. Occasionally teens told the truth because they knew a lie wouldn't fly – they'd be caught. Sometimes they told the truth because they just felt obligated, saying, "They're my parents, I'm supposed to tell them." But the main motivation that emerged was that teens told their parents the truth in hopes their parents might give in and say it was okay. Usually, this meant an argument ensued, but it was worth it if their parents might budge.

For the average Pennsylvania teen, they told the truth only about four areas of conflict. Meaning (since they lied about twelve areas) they were three times more likely to lie than to attempt a protest.

In the families where there was less deception, there was a much higher ration of arguing/complaining. Arguing was good – arguing was honesty. The parents didn't necessarily realize this. The arguing stressed them out.

Darling found this same pattern when she compared her results in the United States against companion studies replicated in the Philippines. She fully expected to see less arguing in the average Filipino home than in an American home. In the Philippines, family members are supposed to preserve harmony, not foment conflict; also, young people are not supposed to challenge their parents – because they are taught to believe that they owe parents a debt that can never be repaid. “A good child in the Philippines is supposed to be obedient, so because of that, we didn't think they would argue. We thought they would avoid discussion. But they had the highest rates of conflict. It was completely antithetical to our predictions.”

It took further analysis for Darling to understand this counterintuitive result. The Filipino teens were fighting their parents over the rules, but not over the authority of the parents to set rules. While they might have felt the rules were too restrictive, they were far more likely to abide by the rules. In American families, the teens didn't bother to argue. Instead, they just pretended to go along with their parents' wishes, but then they did what they wanted to do anyway.

Certain types of fighting, despite the acrimony, are ultimately a sign of respect – not of disrespect.

University of Rochester's Dr. Judith Smetana, a leader in the study of teen disclosure, confirms that, over the long term, “moderate conflict with parents [during adolescence] is associated with better adjustment than either no-conflict or frequent conflict.”

Most parents don't make this distinction in how they perceive their arguments with their children. Dr. Tabitha Holmes studied over fifty sets of mothers and their teen daughters. Her sample was drawn from families in a program called Upward Bound, funded by the U.S. Department of Education to give high-schoolers from low-income families a chance at attending college. The mothers had aspirations for their daughters and were quite protective of them – often by demanding obedience. Holmes did extensive interviews asking both mother and daughter, separately, to describe their arguments and how they felt about them. And there was a big difference.

Holmes found that 46% of the mothers rated their arguments as being destructive to the relationship. Being challenged was stressful, chaotic, and (in their perception) disrespectful. The more frequently they fought, and the more intense the fights were, the more the mom rated the fighting as harmful. But only 23% of the daughters felt that their arguments were destructive. Far more believed that fighting *strengthened* their relationship with their mother. “Their perception of the fighting was really sophisticated, far more than we anticipated for teenagers,” noted Holmes. “They saw fighting as a way to see their parents in a new way, as a result of hearing their mother's point of view be articulated.”

What most surprised Holmes was learning that for the teen daughters, fighting more often, or having bigger fights, did not cause the teens to rate the fighting as harmful and destructive.

Statistically, it made no difference at all. “Certainly, there is a point in families where there is too much conflict. But we didn’t have anybody in our study with an extreme amount of conflict.” Instead, the variable that seemed to matter most was how the arguments were resolved. Essentially, the daughter needed to feel heard, and when reasonable, their mother needed to budge. The daughter had to win some arguments, and get small concessions as a result of others.

Daughters who rated arguing as destructive had parents who stonewalled, rather than collaborated. The daughters heard “Don’t argue with me!” before even uttering a word. “Even the tiniest of concessions made them feel it was resolved okay,” Holmes said. “One daughter told of wanting a tattoo. Her mom forbade it, but allowed the girl to buy a pair of crazy shoes that the mom had previously denied her.”

“Parents who negotiate ultimately appear to be more informed,” according to Dr. Robert Laird, a professor at the University of New Orleans. “Parents with unbending, strict guidelines make it a tactical issue for kids to find a way around them.”

This makes sense, yet it’s a very controversial finding, because in our society today we are warned not to be pushovers; we’re advised that giving in breeds a nation of whiners and beggars. Even Nancy Darling’s Mod Squad study showed that permissive parents are not successful parents.

So the science seems to be duplicitous – on one hand, parents have to be strict enforcers of rules, but on the other hand, parents need to be flexible or the ensuing conflict will be destructive to their teens’ psyches. Will the scientists please make up their minds? Or is there some finer distinction we’re missing?

Well, the narrow definition of pushover parents are those who give in to their kid because they can’t stand to see their child cry or whine. They placate their children just to shut them up. They want to be their kid’s friend, and they’re uncomfortable being seen as the bad guy. That’s not the same as a parent who makes sure her child feels heard, and if the child has made a good argument for why a rule needs to be changes, lets that influence her decision.

Nancy Darling found the same distinction. The type of parents who were lied to the least had rules and enforced them consistently, but they had found a way to be flexible that allowed the rule-setting process to still be respected. “If a child’s normal curfew is 11pm, and they explain to their parent something special is happening, so the parent says, ‘Okay, for that night only, you can come home at 1am’ – that encourages the kid to not lie, and to respect the time.” This collaboration retains a parent’s legitimacy.

It has taken the psychological establishment decades to narrow in on this understanding. Dr. Laurence Steinberg at Temple University articulates this history in his books and papers. Until the early 1970s – an era when psychology was driven more by theory than by empirical studies – “parents were told to expect oppositionalism and defiance. The absence of conflict was seen as indicative of stunted development,” Steinberg writes. In other words, if your child wasn’t fighting and rebelling, something was wrong with him. This perspective was articulated throughout the 1950s and 1960s by theorists such as Anna Freud, Peter Blod, and Erik Erikson, who coined the term “identity crisis.” But they almost exclusively studied teenagers in clinics and therapy – they were oversampling the problem teens.

In the mid-1970s, a variety of studies sampled adolescents drawn from schools, not clinics. “These studies found that 75% of teenagers reported having happy and pleasant relationships with their parents,” described Steinberg. Rebellion and conflict were not normal after all. In 1976, a seminal study by Sir Michael Rutter – considered by many to be the father of modern child psychiatry – found that 25% of teens who were fighting with their parents had been doing so long before hitting puberty. Becoming a teenager wasn’t the trigger.

At that point, the narrative of adolescence bifurcated. Pop psychology, fueled by the new explosion of self-help publishing, continued to pump out the message that the teen years are a period of storm and stress – and certainly, for many, they are. This was the dominant perspective presented in movies and in music, and there was no shortage of experts who worked with teens suffering from depression or conduct disorder to testify that angst was the norm. In the self-help aisles, Steinberg pointed out, the babies are all cuddly and the teens are all spiteful.

But for the next two decades, the social scientists kept churning out data that showed traumatic adolescence was the exception, not the norm.

Only in the last decade has the field sorted out these dual competing narratives and found an explanation for them. Essentially, the pop psychology field caters to parents, who find having a teenager in the home to be really stressful. But the social scientists were polling the teens, most of whom didn’t find adolescence so traumatic. This is exactly what Tabitha Holmes learned – that parents rate all the arguing as destructive, while teens find it generally to be productive.

“The popular image of the individual sulking in the wake of a family argument may be a more accurate portrayal of the emotional state of the parent than the teenager,” Steinberg writes. “Parents are more bothered by the bickering and squabbling that takes place during this time than are adolescents, and parents are more likely to hold onto the affect after a negative interaction with their teenagers.”

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In the popular media, the dual contrasting narratives of adolescence continue. According to many news stories, teens are apathetic and unprepared. These stories mention that alcohol abuse is high, teen pregnancy is ticking back up, and huge numbers of high school seniors are failing their state exit exams even though they supposedly passed all their classes. The California State University system, for example, admits the top third of the state’s high school seniors. Yet six out of ten CSU students have to take remedial classes; half are not academically prepared to be in college.

Then, to hear other stories, today’s teens are so focused on success that it’s alarming. The rate of kids in high school taking advanced math and science courses has leapt 20%. Colleges are drowning in applications from driven teens: the majority of teens now apply to at least four schools. In the last 35 years, enrollment in the nation’s colleges has skyrocketed from 5.8 million to 10.4 million. Sure, a sizeable portion of them need remedial help – but it’s a smaller portion now than in the 1980s. Their overachieving isn’t limited just to their academics, either. Surveys of incoming college freshmen find that 70% of them volunteer weekly, and 60% hold down jobs while in school. Voting is up, for those 18 and older, and the proportion who’ve participated in an organized demonstration is at 49%, the highest in history. The students who entered college in 2008 were engaged in more political dialogue than any class since 1968.

I suppose this split-personality is natural; both narratives exist because we need them to echo our experience at any particular time. They compete, but they both persist. We carry dual narratives whenever a phenomenon can't be characterized by a singular explanation. We now have dual narratives not just of adolescence, but of the twenty-something years and of being unmarried at forty. In the eyes of some, these reflect an unwillingness to accept reality; to others, they reflect the courage to refuse a compromised life.

The danger is when these narratives don't just reflect, they steer. Wrong from the start, comprising only half the story, these narratives nevertheless become the explanatory system through which adolescents see their life. I can only wonder how many teens, naturally prone to seeing conflict as productive, instead are being taught to view it as destructive, symptomatic of a poor relationship rather than a good one. How many like their parents just fine, yet are hearing that it's uncool to do so? How many are acting disaffected and bored because showing they care paints them as the fool? And how many can't tell their parents the truth because honesty is just not how the story goes?