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**Lighthouse Parents: How We can
Provide Guidance for Adolescent
Children**

How to Guide Children through
Adolescence
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Sample Translation

By Annette Pollner

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Chapter 1

The Lighthouse – The World Needs Strong Parents!

Beate's daughter Maya is angry. She was meeting her friends to go swimming. But Beate is planning a family barbecue and Maya really isn't into it. At the age of 13, family events are no longer among her preferred leisure activities. And so Maya stomps her foot, gives her mother a big-eyed stare and says nothing, at least for now. Beate keeps talking at her, she tries to negotiate, but Maya isn't responding. Then she grumbles, feels misunderstood, states her opinion that the whole family is stupid and runs off to her room. Slamming the door is the final act of her temper tantrum.

Beate feels insecure. She wants to have her daughter at the family barbecue. But she also understands that Maya is at an age when she's separating more and more from her family, and that this process is important for her development. And of course she doesn't want to isolate her from her friends. The longer Beate thinks about her situation, the angrier she gets. She feels powerless, misunderstood and alone. Beate feels almost suffocated by her emotions. She really wants to show her power: 'I'm the one who decides what's right'. And that must be done very loudly. She walks to Maya's room, tears the door open and screams that Maya won't be allowed to leave the house today under any circumstances! And now the situation really starts to escalate...

Many parents of kids going through puberty or pre-puberty are familiar with scenes like these. Typical subjects of conflict are school, the “wrong” friends or social media. And it's not rare for parents to respond with insecurity, anger or helplessness. But here's the problem: demonstrations of power separate parents and children. They no longer understand each other and lose contact. And it's also not rare for such conflicts

to lead to aggressive power struggles that make further dialogue impossible.

There are various strategies for dealing with conflicts. The reactions I describe above are reminiscent of the so-called authoritarian style of parenting. The child is controlled by their care-giver through distance, fear and obedience. Parents occupy the top of the ladder of hierarchy and are immune to criticism. Children are at the very bottom. In order to uphold their position, parents hand out punishment. But the attempt to regain control by exercising their power creates even more resistance from the child. We adults can only control our own actions, thoughts and emotions, but not those of our children!

In the seventies, anti-authoritarian parenting was celebrated as a revolutionary alternative concept. It put its faith in encountering each other, in openness, freedom, encouragement and trust. If children were allowed to do what they wanted then their potential would naturally evolve. Parental regulation was frowned upon. But the results of this parental concept are quite sobering. Since the eighties, a lot of scientific research has found that children who, because they were raised with this parenting model, never had to adapt, showed, on average, a lower tolerance for frustration and, depending on the child's temperament, a tendency for crossing boundaries or for anxious-depressive withdrawal.

Our generation is faced with the dilemma that we can't and don't want to exercise authority in the way we knew and learned it. On the other hand, anti-authoritarian parenting has also proved difficult. The time-honoured strategies don't work anymore. But at the same time, in my work as a family therapist and also as a mother I can see that parental tasks have become more wide-ranging and challenging and societal expectations have increased – as have parents' expectations of themselves.

For many years, every day, I've met competent and loving parents in my practice who see themselves as total failures. They feel insecure, helpless and alone. Something absolutely fundamental is missing: trust in their gut feelings, their instincts, and support. That's not surprising. Raising kids today is a complex job. Parents need to be managers, psychologists, social workers and educators, and preferably also experts in health, sports and nutrition. Children are supposed to be socially competent, curious about the world, open to new things, able to have their own opinions, be self-aware and self-confident. Even during their school years, more engagement, internships and clear plans for the future are now required. Spending time abroad has almost become essential. The overabundance of options is overwhelming for both parents and adolescents. How can parents assess their kids' future opportunities when it comes to specific educational options? What kind of university course is right and makes sense? At the same time, the internet has changed many things. Influencers and bloggers from a virtual world that many parents are not very familiar with are the new role models. Communication happens almost exclusively over social media.

This becomes particularly tricky when children get close to puberty and want more separation. Of course, right from the first day of their lives, every child develops into a separate individual that expresses their own personality. But while the child is a baby, the mother's primal instinct is very strong and the demands on parental action are obvious. In addition, a baby's ability to make decisions and express interests that go beyond the archaic need to be taken care of are very limited. Even in the toddler phase, it's easy for parents to see when their children need support, help and explanations and when it's better to let the little ones have their own experiences.

When pre-puberty starts, around the age of eight to ten, things become more difficult for parents. Children begin to separate more clearly, and the family experiences more discussions, withdrawals, anger and arguments. For the parents, this can sometimes be the start of a very painful process. I often see parents who feel desperate and bewildered in these situations. But these are healthy developments for their child. Because they are searching for a new style of parenting, different from the traditional ones, and because they feel insecure when it comes to their own natural instincts, many haven't yet discovered the right way to be

strong parents during a demanding time.

When I was looking for a solution, the following image came to my mind: Imagine a harbour without a lighthouse and where a clear, fixed point of reference is therefore missing. This may work more or less in good weather but when a storm is brewing, when the sea becomes restless and the sky darkens, and when the waves get higher, problems arise. Boats returning to harbour won't be able to find their way back to their moorings, ships leaving harbour are setting out into the open sea without visual orientation and are in danger of getting lost in the rough waters.

Children are like boats. They need orientation, a framework and clear structures. It's very natural for them to want to travel further away and discover the world but in order to do this they need our guidance. A secure bond with their parents gives them stability. Strong parents show them the way through both calm and more tumultuous times, they are the lighthouse in their children's lives. Where that framework is missing, chaos emerges. Lack of orientation and unclear decisions destabilise the entire family system. Children feel lost, they can become excessively loud, fidgety, aggressive or even depressive if they don't feel safe and adequately guided by their parents.

Now imagine, by contrast, a harbour whose lighthouse is regularly occupied and where everyone can rely on its light sweeping over the harbour and the open sea at regular intervals. Every ship, every sail boat has their own fixed mooring, they can find their way into the harbour and out again at all times even when the sea gets rough.

How can parents succeed today – with all the uncertainty that parenthood but also the modern world, the new media etc. bring with them – in being indestructible lighthouses, with a fixed position, a good overview, the ability to create both order and structure and set boundaries?

While I was researching new methods, I met Idan Amiel in Israel. He's a clinical psychologist and director of the Parents' Counseling Unit at the Schneider Children's Hospital, the biggest Children's Hospital in the Middle East. His specialised team of psychologists has been working with the phenomenon of "disoriented parents" for many years.

Modernisation has left its marks on families in Israel too. Traditionally, in Israeli society, children are more important than any other need. Children symbolise life and survival. Every child is a gift and is loved and supported as the individual it is. Society shapes itself around the child rather than the child having to shape itself to fit into society. But huge workloads, the frantic pace of development in the digital world as well as their constant fear for the safety of their children caused by the political situation have made Israeli parents anxious and insecure. They avoid setting boundaries and there is a lack of clear messages. For years, psychologists observed growing aggressions from children against their parents, as well as children and adolescents distancing themselves from school and developing depression and anxiety. A method of working with parents and supporting them was needed.

Based on these observations, psychologists developed a sustainable solution approach with a focus on taking action and taking a position. The concept of "New Authority" is in the tradition of non-violent resistance and promotes strength rather than power. It is based, among other influences, on non-violent communication and attachment theory research, focussing on relationship work. The main concept is that relationships are created through attachment and not through oppression. We don't interact with our children showing power but rather strength. And we can only be good parents and a functioning family if we fulfil our basic need, the need to belong. Every human being is looking for a group to belong to that supports them. That's the way humanity survived and started to develop at such a rapid pace.

The keywords of "New Authority" are presence, orientation and perseverance. Particularly in times of crisis, this action-oriented concept teaches parents, teachers and educators how to become aware of their own



rules and values, how to develop a vigilant presence, de-escalate conflict, set boundaries and give their children respectful guidance.

New Authority has developed very specific techniques to empower parents. It works a lot with 'Internal Dialogue' and 'Announcements'. But transparency, perseverance and gestures of love consistently play an important part.

What is special about this approach is the fact that the psychologists only talk to the parents. During a counselling process lasting several weeks they never meet the children. For me as a family therapist who likes to invite the entire family into her practice from time to time, that was initially an unfamiliar setting. But eventually it made sense. Children often mirror their parents. Their behaviour shows their parents that something is going wrong or is too much. It is the parents' responsibility to change that. And for that, they need to work on their own attitudes, emit a strong presence, and be in touch with themselves and their kids. When that works well, it creates a secure attachment for their child.

I've been working with this approach for several years now and it has produced great success for many families: The mother regularly taking time-outs, the father of three children and owner of a new start-up putting his phone away for an hour and telling his kids all about his day, or the parents who manage to get their daughter back to school after weeks of absence.

My work shows me that parents first and foremost need a strong bond to their own inner self. In order to be able to accompany their children well, they need to be self-aware and self-confident themselves. Free spirits need clear guidance and secure relationships. You can only provide security if you feel secure yourself. If we know where we stand right now, how we are doing and what is important to us, we will be able more and more often to navigate life lovingly and in a relaxed manner, both for ourselves and for others – just like a lighthouse whose light reliably reaches out over the water.

In this book, I would like to show you how it can be done. The book will help parents to connect to their own gut feelings. It teaches parents to act calmly in difficult situations without endangering their relationship with their children. And it shows an approach for relationship work, how important perseverance and vigilant care are for children and how crucial parental self-care is for a sense of lightness in everyday family life. The lighthouse can only contribute to the safety of the ships within its harbour if it is grounded in firm foundations.

Chapter 6

And We Still Love You Anyway – Reconciliation in the Family

In many of the family stories told in this book we see parents stuck in a vicious circle. These parents have almost nothing positive left to say about their child. They can barely connect with their child's talents, loveable aspects, positive behaviours or character traits any more. The vicious circle of conflict and despair prevents them from seeing their own love of their child.

Remember the chapter about Vigilant Care? Anna, who rarely leaves her room and refuses to talk to her parents. She's no longer interested in shared family events. Or the chapter about anger, where Noah shouts at his father and slams the door. Alternatively, he's silent, he's grumpy and spreads his bad mood all around the house. Or the chapter about Announcements where Michael terrorises his entire family with his frustration with school, berates his mother, physically attacks his sister and where the parents themselves are going through a big marital crisis, arguing a lot about Michael. These children hugely challenge their parents through their behaviours, whether it's wearing a mini-skirt that's far too short, or the daily resistance to doing their homework. However, the kids are looking for a way out of the conflict but they don't know what direction to take. These family crises have often become chronic so that the bad atmosphere rules the family

and they rarely talk to each other anymore. An uncomfortable silence takes over in these families. Rather than strengthening the bonds, it separates parents and children from each other.

Everything we do – whether we're reading this book, getting advice, engage in self-reflection or assess our lives from a new point of view – is based on a simple fact: we love our children. Our love is the main motivation for working on our attachments, relationships and a safe harbour for our families.

Arguments stifle the feeling of love and affection. For a brief moment, but maybe even for a quite a long while. We are shocked ourselves when our anger suddenly grows so much that we can no longer connect to our love and affection. Such moments are brief and terrifying but they happen. These are the moments when parents stop, in shock, in my counselling room and ask themselves: "Did I really say that?" These moments, when you think: 'I can't embrace my child right now. I'm so angry that I'd rather not see them. I want to run away! What am I doing here anyway? I could be relaxing on a beach and instead I have to let myself be insulted by this teenager.' These are very human moments experienced by us as parents. But we don't have to let them rule us. It's vital to return to our loving and positive relationship every time. And for that, structures, boundaries and a positive attitude are not enough. Something more existential is needed. What is needed are gestures of love. They are the bridge we need to cross the abyss towards our children.

In order to get them back into positive thinking and positive actions, I ask parents in the counselling room about the good times in their families. Every family can talk about the good moments. These moments show us: yes, we are capable of interacting with each other well and lovingly but sometimes we forget how to do it. As soon as we start to remember the positive, we can re-integrate it into our lives. Reminding ourselves of gestures of love towards our younger children up to the age of eleven or twelve is relatively easy. Nature has cleverly taken care of that. The 'little ones' still look cute, they benefit from our instinct to protect the juveniles of our species, and anyway, we just want to cuddle them. No matter how exhausting their temper tantrums are, our loving emotions overwhelm us very quickly.

In situations dominated by anger we sometimes need to be patient. You know what it's like. You're angry and can't imagine taking them in your arms? Your child is also angry, feels alone and is longing for closeness. But your child can't manage to connect with you on their own. Only you can approach your child. Invite your child into your embrace. Maybe both your positions are so hardened that your child can't immediately accept your embrace. Don't be disappointed. Stay calm and say: "You can come to me at any time and get a cuddle. I would love it!"

And there is also a multitude of gestures of love that stand for small, everyday actions and can bring us together when we're away from the conflict. Small messages of love, on sticky notes attached to the fridge or the mirror. For example 'Have a nice day', 'Enjoy your school trip', or just 'I believe in you' or 'I love you'.

That way, positive aspects of your lives become relevant again and distract from the constant conflicts. If you know, for example, that an important exam is coming up and your child needs your support, a little good luck charm next to the breakfast plate can really help. Your child will go to school feeling happy. And no matter what the outcome of the exam, your child knows that they have a family waiting for them at home. A family that is there for them. 'I'm not alone!'

Or quality time with mum or dad, just by themselves, without the other siblings. Finally a setting where you can talk calmly and listen to each other. And these mutual one-on-ones don't even have to last very long. Small children can be very happy to spend just half an hour on their own with one parent. Story time in the evening can also be a special ritual. No one is talking about the negative events of the day then. On the contrary, a little diary of happiness for both child and parents where only the nice moments of the day are entered, can help to create a harmonious end to the day.

It all becomes more complicated when we're dealing with teenagers. Puberty sneaks into the life of our child

and becomes a new, permanent family member that creates a lot of unrest. One morning, our sweet little angels wake up and, to us, become little monsters while, to them, we are now the former heroes of their childhood. They used to worship us and now we're such hard work for them. More than that, they start to question us. We either interfere too little or too much. We just don't understand them. Their problems are huge and we can't solve them – we simply don't get it.

But although we don't rate very highly right now – due to developmental reasons – our teenage kids are longing for us. What this means is that when our teens get up in the morning and complain about their breakfast, what they may really need is a loving embrace. Or a calm follow-up question about what's really going on. They need a good listener. Particularly during this phase, children need even more one-on-one times with calm conversations or silence. It is important to get this across to your kids: "I don't immediately need an answer. We don't have to achieve a positive result in this conversation. We're going to stay at your side the whole time and we'll accompany you throughout this process." So don't feel insulted when your teen thinks their best friend understands them and their problems better than you do, in spite of mum's brilliant advice. The most important thing is the knowledge that we can ask and speak, no matter how awful our teenage kids can sometimes be to us.

Text messages on the phone can also be really nice. Just getting in touch with a short sentence – "How did it go in maths?" or "I'm having a stressful day and am looking forward to spending the evening with you" – can resolve a few things after a bad start to the day. Even if there's an argument in the morning, messages like these can build a bridge towards a more relaxed and welcoming mood. You teenager understands that you're no longer throwing a fit but thinking of them in a positive way, and are looking forward to meeting up again. Parental perseverance, regular invitations to talk and spending time together are all gestures of love that signal: "I am here and I see you. I'm going to take you in my arms or I'm simply going to listen."

Even cooking their favourite food or baking their favourite cake can deepen the relationship with your teenage child. Spending the afternoon together in town or preparing for school after the summer holidays – all these gestures of love can happen without talking about any existing points of conflict. There should be peaceful moments for everyone in the family. Moments that make it worthwhile to stay in that particular community. They create a sense of being able to deal with each other well, to know how to do this in a positive and loving spirit.

This is a call to all parents: come back to taking positive action! We can all complain, we're all good at it. But small loving letters, calm conversations and a positive response give our kids a chance to come back to us any time and find stability in us.

Translator's Notes Anette Pollner

This text uses a lot of terms from the CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapies) schools of therapy/counselling. Other terms, like Vigilant Care, are specific to the 'New Authority' approach. Some of these terms may seem a little unfamiliar in general language but the text usually explains them.

The author sometimes suddenly slips from third person into first person within one paragraph, showing us a kind of internal monologue. This is very unusual in non-fiction, so I order to clarify the change of point of view, I used quotation marks.