

Our Connections: The Journey to Happiness

By K. Meagan Ledendecker

Recently I was driving over a mountain ridge, gazing out at the pastoral expanse before me. Filled with a sense of possibility, I turned on the radio and scanned through the stations. Amidst the music, I heard something that made me pause: people get happier as they get older. Could it be true?

Just a week before, I had been looking through old photos, searching for the trajectory of youth toward maturity. One thing that struck me as I pored over the pictures was how as young people mature, their smiles, really their essence, doesn't change.

Yet as our young people move from childhood through adolescence, it can feel like we lose touch. They transform so much in such a short time. As our children struggle through changes, it's easy to question whether they are indeed getting happier.

Daniel J. Siegel, author of *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, writes about how the adolescent brain undergoes powerful adaptations: "A fifteen-year-old isn't simply a ten-year-old with five additional years of experience. Brain development means that as adolescents we can think in conceptual and abstract ways a ten-year-old cannot even imagine."

This innovative thinking can be a real gift to those of us who aren't in the midst of dramatic neurological change, especially if we take the time to ask, listen, and try to see without judgment.

At the beginning of the summer, I was hiking with a group of adolescents. They were loud and boisterous. At first I was bothered by the raucous troupe, but then I quieted my thoughts and noticed what was happening around me. I watched as adolescent boys shared hugs. I heard laughter. I saw vulnerable

conversation about shedding tears. I saw brilliant eyes noticing and acknowledging. I heard heartfelt insights about life. I saw young people in deep and meaningful relationships.

Apparently, these kinds of relationships are the key to getting happier as we get older. The snippet I heard on the radio on my mountain drive was from the TED Radio Hour. The episode highlighted a 75-year longitudinal study called the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which shows scientifically how people get happier as they get older – with one important caveat: that we are happier (and actually healthier) when we have a web of good relationships with people we can really count on.

Perhaps what we can focus on giving to our young people is a foundation of this kind of connection and relationship, a true sense of belonging. Our youth have such possibility before them. It is our responsibility as adults in their lives to understand their potential, their development, and their essence, so that we can best support them in their growth.

Personally, this summer I'm going to be reading Josh Shipp's book, *The Grown-Up's Guide to Teenage Humans: How to Decode Their Behavior, Develop Unshakable Trust, and Raise a Respectable Adult*. Because as our young people drive over the next ridge in their lives, it is the relationships and secure connections that really matter.

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker, Director of Education at The Montessori School of the Berkshires, has a fifteen-year-old, a ten-year-old, and a six-year-old, all of whom are in their own stages of this journey. www.berkshireremontessori.org

