

Spring 2012  
Volume 5, Issue 2

# The Practical Parent

Visit [www.TheApproximateParent.com](http://www.TheApproximateParent.com) in June for pre-order information!

A Special Segment:

## 1 THE APPROXIMATE PARENT

*This issue of The Practical Parent could also be called the “shameless plug” issue—shameless, because I’m genuinely pleased to announce the publication of The Approximate Parent: Discovering the Strategies that Work with Your Teenager (©2012 Fine Optics Press, ISBN 978-0-9852276-9-2). The book is excerpted here and due out in presale in July, with the official publication date October 15, 2012!*

*There are thousands of books on how to parent your teen the “right” or best way. While they might be helpful, they can also help you feel overwhelmed and guilty if the approach doesn’t work. This is a book about helping you implement your own approach to parenting, by helping you understand how adolescents develop and showing you how to translate that knowledge into wise approximations of what to do in the hard situations.*

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Simon, MFT

*For Parents, Educators and Mental Health Professionals Who Care About Teens*



**The following excerpt is from Chapter 4, “Parenting in the Digital Age.”**

Behavioral targeting and digital “profiling” has its doublespeak and jargon, too. You are either a *target* or you’re *waste*. A target is an online consumer really worth following—the patterns of their digital activities are meaningful and they’re worth going after because they’ve got money. If not, well, you’re *waste*. That doesn’t mean the marketers are going to ignore you; it just means you’re going to get different kinds of “options” presented to you and embedded in your digital experience. Companies are still happy to have your money; they just don’t care as much about you. It’s a bit like the difference between an institutional investor at a brokerage firm and being an account holder at a major bank. If you’re in the latter category, you’re cute but you ultimately don’t matter too much, money-wise.

But what *kinds* of targets are you and your teen? Are you a “socially liberal organic eater” or the “single city struggler”? You just might be the “diabetic individual in the household.” You may *not even have diabetes*. In the brave new world of digital marketing, if you visited *diabeticlifestyle.com* on behalf of your aging Aunt, and you’re a female, there

is every chance you will become the “diabetic individual in the household,” and you will soon start seeing ads, receiving emails and coupons from Nutrisystem or magically seeing “news” stories about Glucerna.com. You okay with that? That might all be a little disconcerting and just mildly annoying. Things might get interesting, though, when you visit a health insurance website later that month and try to get a quote on a policy, only to find your quoted rates are unusually high. This insurance company may very well have figured out that the person with your IP (“Internet protocol”) address attached to your laptop computer belongs to “diabetic individual in the household.” Now do I have your attention? Joseph Turow, author of *The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth* got my attention. He’s the one who described just how the new marketing industry works in the digital age. Whose got your *teenager’s* attention? What is he or she doing right now, as you read this? Oh, I’m sorry...you didn’t agree to all this? Your teen didn’t agree to this? It’s going on—with or without your consent—and it’s a multi-billion dollar business. (Continued on page 2...)

## The Approximate Parent *(continued from page 1)*



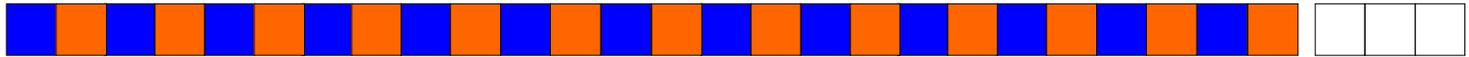
*“I just believe in a fair fight and this isn’t a fair fight. Trillions of dollars in technology and know-how stacked up against a 15-year-old boy or girl is not a fair fight in the battle of who gets the power to define the Identity, Self-Worth and Self-Esteem of your child.”*

Advertisers and other corporations know that if you can afford it (and often, even if you can’t) you want to buy what your teens and children want. For millions of teenagers in America, given our relative affluence in this country—it’s mostly *all* disposable income. Turow provides more details for the anthropological and philosophical vision provided by Thomas de Zengotita: mass media and corporations want your teenagers money and they’re going to try get it by becoming the *primary sources of identity development for your kids*. This isn’t some crazy conspiracy theory. As argued earlier, the idea is to link up, as soon as possible in the life of your child, brand loyalty with *identity*, such that your child comes to feel that choosing to buy this or that is a *natural* choice, reflective of who they *really* are and *what they really care about*. *I* chose Levi’s jeans. Nobody *made* me do that. *Yes, they did*. Some of the smartest people in the world—and some not so brilliant people right out of college—are paid anywhere from a modest wage to an obscene amount of money to work very, very hard to *make you buy things*. And the work these folks do is what your teens see daily on their iPads, iPods, laptop and desktop computers, smartphones, on Facebook, Yahoo, through Google searches, on library computers and kiosks, radio, billboards, Internet cafes, on gaming devices, on buses, at schools, in airports. *Whose got your teenager’s attention?*

You might think be thinking that your daughter isn’t online all the time; she watches MTV or VH1—it’s just a bunch of stupid television shows (it used to be a music video channel, but, that’s a different decade). In fact, you’ve seen one or two of the shows like “Real Life” and “If You Really Knew Me.” Those were pretty good shows, in fact. They depict real teens doing real things and they treat teenagers very respectfully. True. But the “we care about teenagers” division is a very small division of media giant Viacom. Media critic Mark Crispin Miller puts the points succinctly when he writes “The MTV machine doesn’t listen to the young so that it can make the young happier. It doesn’t listen to the young so it can come up with startling new kinds of music...[it tunes in] so it can figure out how to pitch what Viacom has to sell to

those kids.” The relationship between media and teenager is a symbiotic one—one that was explored beautifully in the Frontline special *The Merchants of Cool*. The program details the collapsing distinction between culture and marketing and shows how the creation and usurping of “cool” is the stock in trade for media giants and advertisers who want to get close to your teenagers, to help create, foster and maintain identities that buy what they’re selling.

What’s the problem, you say? Am I starting (or already) sounding too much like a communist—against free market capitalism? What’s wrong with consumer choice and customization? But if you’re already in the camp of folks who think it is or might be problematic, then you want some answers to at least a few hundred questions. Perhaps the most important questions, though, include: What, if any, are the limits to the power of the marketplace to invade or even define privacy in the name of “just doing business”? What are the relative influences between corporate control of media and authentic individual autonomy and choice, “free” of the influences of state and market? What is the role of a public realm or vital sector between state and market that has and enforces protections *against* abuses or largely unchecked power of states and markets?<sup>1</sup> These are all important but rather large and theoretical questions. What I want to know is: how and where does my child really get to decide who they are and who they want to be, that is not primarily controlled or prefigured or assaulted by concerns about *buying (a product or service)* and/or *status (how and whether the “world” loves you)*? The power of mass media isn’t new. The “new” part of all this is the incredible pervasiveness and accessibility to “targets” and “waste” afforded by digital media and the consolidation of technology, messaging and access to consumers of all ages, all the time. I’m not a communist. I just believe in a fair fight and this isn’t a fair fight. Trillions of dollars in technology and know-how stacked up against a 15-year-old boy or girl is not a fair fight in the battle of who gets the power to define the Identity, Self-Worth and Self-Esteem of your child. ☒



## What Does it Mean to be an *Approximate Parent*?

Becoming a parent or raising a teenager isn't *inherently* a spiritual practice or ground for ethical development. In other words, the ethical dimension of parenting teenagers is neither something that is a *given*, nor something that *has to be followed*, whether you like it or not. It is a choice. *The ethical dimension of parenting is something you can choose, but do not have to choose.* If you were forced into it, as "the way things are," it would not be in the realm of the ethical; it would be about acting in accordance with the nature of something that could not be otherwise. It would be like congratulating a pencil for obeying Newton's First Law of Motion and staying on the table. The pencil isn't *deciding* to stay put until a strong wind (or a teenager) comes along and knocks it on the floor; it has no choice.

But you can *choose*—as you are trying to teach your teens, that they can choose—the *good*; they can choose the right things for themselves in their lives with others. If parenting were easy—just a matter of following principles, like an object follows the laws of motion—you'd just pick the "best" parenting style and follow it. But you cannot do that because choices around parenting are always *case specific*. Good choices around parenting are only "good" because they fit *your*

teenager. One size doesn't fit all. *One size can't fit all. That's why parenting is so hard. That's why parenting can engender so much sadness and loss, as well as joy. That's the ethical dimension in parenting—that you have the choice to face the difficulty.* Am I being too glum here? I don't think so. Living is grieving. If you're alive, you're coming up against limitations and losses and you have to adjust and adapt. You can't make life *perfect* for your children. The life of humans and humans in families is such that you don't actually *know* what is *perfect* for your child and even if you're a caring, loving person, you can't really know *in advance* what your child will need, at each moment. In parenting a *good approximation is something that we realize after the fact.*

So parenting teenagers can hurt and engender some suffering. Being a teenager engenders the same. How do you know if you're doing the "right" thing? Parents ask themselves this question all the time. Teens ask themselves this question all the time. This book aims to take you beyond the thinking that determines whether something is "good" or "bad" in parenting based on whether it works once and for all. This book is rooted in the wisdom of *approximation* and the related belief that *you can always get better and you can always try again—always...any time you want and are able.* I aim to give you the tools to do just that and the confidence to feel great about being an *Approximate Parent.*





## Practical Help for Parents

5665 College Avenue  
Suite 340C  
Oakland, CA 94618  
Telephone:  
(510) 433-2959

E-Mail:  
Michael@  
practicalhelpforparents.com

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## Selected Resources on Parenting

- Coontz, S. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and The Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cooperman, S. A., & Gilbert, S. D. *Living with Eating Disorders (Teen's Guides)*. New York: Checkmark Books, 2009.
- Dellasega, C. *The Starving Family: Caregiving Mothers and Fathers Share Their Eating Disorder Wisdom*. Sourcebooks, 2005.
- Nelsen, J.N., & Erwin, C. *Parents Who Love Too Much: How Good Parents Can Learn to Love More Wisely and Develop Children of Character*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000.
- Nelsen, J.N., Lott, L., & Glenn, H. S. *Positive Discipline A-Z, Revised and Expanded 2nd Edition: From Toddlers to Teens, 1001 Solutions to Everyday Parenting Problems*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999.
- MacKenzie, R. J. *Setting Limits with Your Strong-Willed Child: Eliminating Conflict by Establishing Clear, Firm, and Respectful Boundaries*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001.
- Kurcinka, M. S. *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles: Winning for a Lifetime*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2001.
- Neumark-Sztainer, D. *I'm, Like, SO Fat: Helping Your Teen Make Healthy Choices about Eating and Exercise in a Weight-Obsessed World*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2005.
- Riera, M. *Uncommon Sense for Parents of Teenagers*. Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1995. ☒

### About Our Organization...

Founded by adolescent specialist Michael Y. Simon, MFT, a high school counseling director, noted speaker/educator and psychotherapist in private practice, Practical Help for Parents provides real-life solutions as you parent, support and understand the teens and pre-teens in your life. PHFP offers informative, entertaining, research-based

workshops for students and parents, keynotes and presentations to high school and middle school parents, teachers and administrators; access to online Practical Help Tips, articles and web resources; and program development and consultation to mental health professionals, policymakers and schools/school districts. ☒

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5665 College Avenue  
Suite 340C  
Oakland, CA 94618



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