

The BSM Parent Association asked me to give a talk a few years ago with the title: “Parenting the older teenager: Hanging on, letting go”. I was reminded of that talk this past week. It was a Sunday morning, at a church in South Minneapolis, and I was taking questions after an early morning presentation. A woman raised her hand and instead of asking a question said that she parents at her best when she remembers to be detached from her children. Yes, detached – not attached.

For those of you who have been coming to the Parent Association sponsored talks this year, you have heard me talk about “protecting the attachment”. Our teenagers will have a better chance of thriving through their teenage years if we manage to keep them connected to us. We are their buffer. When they are close to us they are less likely to be susceptible to peer pressure, more likely to postpone unhealthy sexual activity, more likely to continue taking their academic career seriously.

What did this woman mean when she said “detached”? It took a few days of talking to colleagues to figure it out.

The term “attachment” has two meanings. When psychologists use the term it implies a healthy connection between parent and child. Originally the term referred to the bond that develops between infant and mother during the early days and weeks of the baby’s life. I think of the attachment as important throughout adolescence as well. In fact, I try to make the point that the parent-infant attachment is easier to achieve because of the nature of children when they are needy and completely dependent on us. Their need for us naturally elicits our nurturance. It is when they approach adolescence that it can be challenging for us to present ourselves in a way that keeps them attached.

But others use the term attachment to mean something less beautiful. If parents are attached to children in an unhealthy way they might feel as if their own worth as a

person depends on the successes of their children. They might have difficulty seeing their child's life as *its own journey*, not a reflection of their hopes and dreams for their child. Conflicts can arise over what courses to take in school, what sports to participate in, what colleges to apply for. Parents who are attached in this way can be enmeshed with their children, afraid to discipline because of fear of alienating them; enabling or rescuing when natural consequences would be more helpful for their development. They might lose their temper over everyday mistakes their children make.

While it is confusing to have two meanings for the term attachment the end result is clear. We need to remember the following:

- We need to do whatever we can to keep our children feeling safe and intimately connected to us.
- We need to remember that we don't own them just because we love them.
- We need to understand that parenting is not cloning.
- We need to celebrate that their journey will ultimately take them to their own adult life, away from us, in the same natural way it did for us when we left our parents and began to live our lives as independent and autonomous adults.