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## **Meanwhile: When teens push parents' panic button**

**Michael Thompson** The Boston Globe  
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Since the time of Plato, parents of every generation have worried that their adolescents are running wild in dangerous and new ways. The Internet has added a new dimension to our concerns, and every story of extreme teen behavior in that realm - from cruel gossip to pornography - pushes our panic button. As always, the actions of a few disturbed kids trigger our fear that all teenagers are doing secret, risky, even dangerous, things too young, much younger than we did. It's so different now, worried parents tell me.

In a parenting workshop I was asked to present recently on "The Secret Life of Teenagers," there was no need to dwell on lurid extremes of adolescent behavior.

The normal secrecy of adolescence is where most parents find themselves stranded, feeling cut off and helpless. However, as different as some things are, as a therapist who has treated teenagers for 30 years, I tend to think that the similarities between the generations are more important than the differences. We were all teenagers once. Don't we remember what it was like? Didn't we all have secret lives?

A few questions may help cue your memory.

How old were you when you first smoked a cigarette? (Did your parents know?)

How old were you when you first lied to your parents? (Did they discover the lie?)

How old were you when you first drank alcohol? (Did you tell your parents?)

If you ever used drugs, how old were you when you used an illicit drug? (Did you inform your parents?)

When did you first caress someone else above (and below) the waist? (Did you tell your mom?)

When did you first have sexual intercourse? (And when did your parents know about that?)

Confessions flowed in the workshop: Cigarettes in fourth grade. Drinking and getting drunk freshman year of high school. Lying about a multitude of matters, large and small. Why? To feel grown up, assert some independence.

The show-stopper was a 42-year-old man, the father of two elementary school children. "My mother thought I was really a responsible boy," he reported. "She would have been shocked to know that I was on the roof of the school, prying off the skylights with friends so we could drop 65 feet into the school pool ... in the dark."

Well, there it was, every parent's deepest fear: that our children will do something risky and we won't be able to stop them, we won't even know. We're terrified that even a responsible boy could lie to his mother and drop from a roof-top skylight, in the dark, 65 feet into a school pool. And how did he feel at the time? "Great!" he said.

Earlier this year, when we were making a documentary, we gave cameras to teenage boys and asked them to film things in the lives of boys that people do not ordinarily see.

A group of boys from an affluent suburb of Boston - all seniors, all college-bound - came back with film they had made on the night of a snowstorm. They had tied one end of a rope to the back of a pick-up truck and the other to a child's plastic sled occupied by a large boy.

While his companions drove down an unplowed road at 35 miles per hour, the boy in the sled was swung wildly from side to side, like a water-skier behind a power boat, and he came terrifyingly close to lethal encounters with trees and telephones poles.

As a parent, you watch the film with your heart in your throat. You want to scream at the screen: "Stop, that's so dangerous!" But what you hear in the soundtrack is the boys whooping and shouting. One of them yells, "This is the best ... idea we've ever had!"

No, no, it's not! It can't be. And then we remember our own lives.

We all had to take some risk, big or small, to feel grown up. It was a risk to smoke, or steal something from a store; it was a risk to let someone else touch your body. It was a risk to dive off the high cliff of a rock quarry.

Having a secret or private life was an essential part of becoming your own person, too. You could have the most loving, attentive, on-the-job parents in the world and you would still have to keep things from them. You may not have to drop from a skylight into a school pool, but you have to have something that they don't know about and didn't pre-approve. Remember?

If you really want to know about the secret lives of teenagers, start by remembering your own.

*(Michael Thompson is a psychologist and coauthor of "Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys.")*