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## Easing teen angst: Practical advice for youth and parents

[Rick Polito](#)

ANNIE FOX has 5,800 responses to 5,800 e-mails from 5,800 teen-agers in her "sent" box. The problems hit all the tangents in the teen trajectory - parents, self-esteem, shame, loneliness, sex.

But most of those 5,800 e-mails have one thing in common.

"They all sign their letters 'Confused,'" says Annie Fox, the Fairfax mom who's turned herself into an authority on adolescent angst, writing two books and delivering her brand of common but seldom-spoken sense in workshops and seminars across the Bay Area.

The 5,800 e-mails are only a slice of the voluminous advice Fox has dispensed in the 10 years since she became "the carpool mom," defacto facilitator to a rolling group therapy session that included her two then-adolescent children.

"We had this movable conversation every day," Fox recalls.

Fox recognized the potential in that role as the trusted adult. Turning that into a career was not the stretch it might seem.

Before she was the carpool mom, Fox had been an education major, earning a master's degree, working in classrooms and helping found the Marin Primary School before leaping into the first waves of the personal computer age with her husband, David. They



Annie Fox has a program that tells teen how to take any problem and figure out how to think about it without being confused. (IJ)



SHOWING THE WAY: Annie Fox, who has written books aimed at young people, talks to Girl Scouts from Marin County on how to be a good friend during a seminar at the Marin YMCA. (IJ photos/Alan Dep)

opened the Marin Computer Center, a drop-in tech lounge, in 1977. "The computers we had had 8K of RAM," she recalls, laughing at the late '70s cutting edge.

She followed that tech trail away from schools, finding careers in software development and writing a guide to basic programming, but kids were a constant component. She had two of them at home and the computer center was a hangout. So when she had her carpool epiphany, the two

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and figure out how to think about it without being confused. (A photo/Alan Dep)

worlds came together with the drag of a mouse.

And a dream.

"I had this dream of a virtual carpool," she said.

The result was [www.theInSite.org](http://www.theInSite.org) and her "Ask Terra" advice persona. It was the early days of the Internet rush and her husband was the content manager for Talk City. The InSite was part of the Talk City orbit and at one point had a heavy schedule of hosted chat with outside experts sitting in for talks on sexuality, friendship, anorexia and a full palette of teen issues.

The InSite isn't so busy now, but it's still up. And Fox is still answering questions. "It's been nine years now, and I'm still getting e-mail from around the world," she says.

She's helped a lot of kids. The kids have educated her. Giving advice is natural for her. Growing up in New York, Fox remembers Ann Landers being her "favorite part of the paper," and covering up Landers' answers to see if her own advice would match the syndicated sage's admonitions. But the process of answering thousands of e-mails made her think about how teen-agers react to problems. With a programmer's sense of order, she conceived of steps and strategies that could apply to any number of dilemmas and dramas.

Fox claims one "five-step program" teaches teens how to "take any problem and figure out how to think about it without being confused."

The advice she provided online turned into a book, "The Teen Survival Guide to Dating and Relating." The education she got from the thousands of letters helped her write "Too Stressed to Think: a Teen Guide to Staying Sane When Life Makes You Crazy."

Many of the ideas sound like common sense, because they are, Fox says. But for teenagers who sign their e-mails "confused" and their equally bewildered parents, common sense is typically lost in the drama. It's not so easy to break down a problem when you're in the middle of it.

Teri Vyenielo met Fox when she helped put together Parent University and Peer Summit



1978: Annie Fox shows some adults how to play chess against the computer, a Processor Technology Sol-20, which had 8K of RAM. (Photo provided by Annie Fox)

workshops as a special projects manager for Marin General Hospital. But Vyenielo also has two teenagers at home and was hungry for strategies and ideas. She's seen Fox talk to parents - "as a parent she gives you hope." And she's seen Fox talk to teens - "She's got a way of talking to kids that they listen."

The ideas are simple, but they're easy to forget in the inevitable moments of conflict. What makes Fox's ideas different from parenting books and lists of helpful tips, says Vyenielo,

is that she explains how confusion and family friction can arise out of natural stress responses.

The fight or flight instinct is triggered in teens in what may seem to adults to be trivial circumstances but the response is real enough to color everything. Fox teaches people to recognize that response and redirect it, Vyenielo says.

"She reminds you to practice. Don't just preach it. Actually do it," Vyenielo says.

"This is the toolkit you need to be able to be heard and to listen."

Greg Atwood is a Novato single dad with a daughter in middle school. He went looking for that toolkit and had trouble finding it. A lot of parents talk to other parents when they're having problems but such informal consultations usually devolve into mutual rants. He tried to talk to a counselor at his daughter's school but "it was clearly a 'this isn't what we do here kind' of meeting." What Fox provided was practical advice, a commodity not always easy to find.

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"We don't come with instructional manuals," Atwood says. "We don't go to school for this."

Atwood was impressed enough after seeing Fox speak once that he subscribed to her newsletter and has been in regular contact since.

Michelle Lehman is another convert. The Marin mom attended one of Fox's presentations as a parent - "It's been a while since my husband and I were sixth-graders," she says - and another with her daughter. Lehman was impressed that Fox was able to connect with both groups so adeptly. She says the whole family learned valuable skills.

"When your kid starts middle school you need to buy Annie's book," Leh-man says.

Fox appreciates the response. But she doesn't pretend to be anything more than a mom with good ideas who took the time to articulate them. "I'm not a clinician," she says. "I'm not a therapist."

But Fox also knows she's on to something and that her particular background gives her the tools to articulate it for a wide audience. She studied education and human development as an academic. Developing computer programming taught her that every process can be broken into steps. She boasts she's "very high on empathy skills."

And she didn't just raise two kids, she used to be one. Fox's own adolescence is decades past but the constant interaction keeps her in touch with that inner teen.

She could have signed "confused" on more than a few letters in her day.

Not 5,800 of them.

But a few.

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