

Tips for Parenting Teens

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Though it is always challenging, working with teens and their parents can be the most rewarding of experiences for a therapist. Particularly when parents are eager to learn and better themselves in their mentoring role. Acceptance of a teenager as an independent, and sometimes problematic, adult-like person is in many ways a defining quality of a successful parent. This acceptance is essential to helping a young person develop the skills for eventually taking full charge of their life.

The best results come when parents see themselves more as consultants than governors. This inherently requires a parent to obtain their children's respect through performance rather than entitlement. Such an approach offers an important illustrative lesson for their children, and will inform the child's own expectations later in life. This is leadership by example rather than by dictation.

Ultimately, the most critical task is for the parent to maintain an effective dialogue. Respecting a teenager, and not attempting to control them, will most often earn their respect, and allow a parent to have further influence. The key is for the parent to offer advisory consultation when solicited, and not before. Parental advice will only have traction with teenage children when they are ready to receive it.

Sometimes parents of teens find the timing and technique in exercising restrained but effective guidance can be a little counterintuitive. Below is a guideline to the most critical best practices for problematic parent-teenager communication issues.

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Trust

Avoid lecturing, nagging, threatening or advancing unsolicited advice. Trust that your teen can and will develop problem-solving skills. Learning through experience is a powerful way of acquiring ideas, values and strategies. Recognize that consequences are a necessary component to your teenager developing higher quality judgment.

Let go

Look for ways that you can "let go" of responsibility, letting your teen take up the task. This demonstrates your confidence and trust in them, while also providing them with the opportunity, through both success and failure, to learn through their experience. It's also more likely to incline them to solicit your advice on future efforts.

Fit the consequence to the problem

Do not take away positive activities such as hockey, dance, and music lessons, as a consequence of misbehavior. Make the correcting consequence fit the problem – don't "over-consequence" the situation by applying too great a lesson, or by applying multiple consequences for a single issue.

Open-ended questions

Use open-ended conditional questions, for example, "Do you want to talk about that," rather than imperative questions like "Why," that are more likely to make teens (as with anyone) more defensive.

Talk

Talk about health-related safety issues such as, responsible sex, birth control, STD's, HIV, date rape, date rape drugs, etc., because teens are unlikely to find accurate reliable information on these issues from casual sources. Ensure that your teenager has a doctor that they feel they can talk to openly and with confidentiality.

Listen without judgment

Understand and expect that your teenager's values regarding their sexuality will likely differ from your own to some extent, and quite possibly to a very great extent. Your best response is to listen, and resist any temptation to judge – their safety is always the priority.

Respond early

Most teens at some point are going to experiment with drugs or alcohol. It is vital to respond early to an episode of experimentation before the destructive aspects of such activity takes a serious toll on the teen's social, intellectual, psychological or physical well being. Intervene when you notice drug paraphernalia, missing alcohol, evidence of smoking at home, moodiness, motivational problems, or erratic behavior. Beware of misdirection moves to throw you off the trail: claims that they are "only holding for a friend" any drug contraband found around the house is a standard misdirection defense. Regardless of how the discussion unfolds, once such paraphernalia has emerged it must be confiscated and disposed of without any debate.

Safety at home

Lock up or safely dispose of all dangerous prescription drugs, such as pain medication, diet related pharmaceuticals, sleeping pills and tonics, or tranquilizers. There is an astonishing array of common remedies that can be used for getting high. Make no assumptions, and keep an eye out for patterns of unusual rates of usage of anything in the medicine cabinet.

Acknowledgement

Make the effort to learn about the things of greatest importance to your teenager. Notice and acknowledge when your teen is "trying." Find things that you like and admire about your teen, and give voice to that sentiment by telling them about it.

Think outside the box, together

When you feel you have reached an impasse and can't agree on an issue, you still have options available to you if you are willing to think outside the box. Try brainstorming together to explore new ways of appraising the issue and developing new options for dealing with it. Defining the problem

together creates shared ownership of the issue and increases the potential for greater commitment to fixing it.

Time

Give yourself and your teenager the time you will both need to build the right solution through experimentation. Finding an immediate perfect answer to a problem is rarely needed or possible. Try instead to make the mutual commitment to the journey your immediate objective. And set your sights on feasibility, not perfection. Schedule regular time to continue the discussion, keeping the solution-building effort on track.

Meal time

Have dinner together as often as possible, but don't turn it into an inquiry hearing as a way to catch up on events when you are busy at other times. The family gathering around a meal should always be an enjoyable time where everyone comes socially closer together. Touching on important issues such as school or behavioral concerns is best left to other occasions where these can be given the full attention that they deserve. The basic mealtime conversation rule should be, keep it light.

A team effort

Parents must be a team, so "parent together." Don't agree to secret covenants that keep one parent out of the loop -- it's destructive to the co-parenting dynamic and it lends validation to really bad values.

Lead by example

Even though you can't get their attention at times, your teen actually does notice your actions and your words, and they will see where there are discrepancies between your theory and your practices. Make sure your behavior is consistent with your stated values. Anything less will destroy your credibility and authority, and it will give your teen an unintended green light to a world of flawed practices.

Discretion

Be discreet about making revelations to family and friends regarding any issues or difficulties your teen is experiencing. When you are tempted to discuss these things with others in an effort to problem

solve, consider that seeking professional advice may be a better option.

In the next issue I'll cover how the themes of trust and communication apply to the specific areas of technology related discord.

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