



Talking Teen

When it comes to teens, experts say parents must proactively communicate to alleviate problems.

by Martha A. Keeffe

Some teenagers show obvious signs of risky behavior – bloodshot eyes, the smell of smoke on their clothing - while others hide their symptoms or are too early in the process to display them. If a change in grades or uncharacteristic mood swings makes you question your child’s behavior, taking a positive approach to communicating your concerns will benefit both you and your teen.

“So much depends on how you talk to your child about uncomfortable situations,” says Cindy Ericksen, a licensed marriage and family therapist, who owns Heart Journey, a private counseling service. “By learning effective parenting techniques many [risky] situations can be prevented. With good communication you will always be further ahead.”

Ericksen offers the following tips to strengthen dialogue.

1) Stay curious.

As children transition into their teen years, it becomes increasingly more difficult to keep the lines of communication open. Make your home a safe place that cultivates honesty and allows your child to express feelings without criticism.

“I encourage parents to be curious about what’s going on in their child’s life – ‘What’s happening in school; how did practice go?’ - without interrogating them,” says Ericksen. “A good start to a conversation is to ask your child in a way that you would ask a friend.” By conveying a sense of respect and trust, you can establish yourself as someone who is safe and approachable.

2) Invite opinions.

Should you suspect that your child is engaging in risky behavior, resist the urge to challenge her. Instead, find opportunities to calmly and rationally confirm any suspicions you might have. (See sidebar on Red Flags, pages 15-16.)

Use movie scenarios, social trends, or discussions about peer behaviors as a stepping-stone for further discussion. “Pick a scene from a movie and ask your child what she would do if she were ever in

that situation,” says Ericksen. Should the conversation touch on risky behaviors by a classmate, listen to your child’s assessment of the subject.

“Asking your child what she thinks about how the parents handled a particular situation can give insight into what your child is dealing with,” Ericksen says. “Give your child permission to discuss tough topics.”

3) Find solutions together.

Whether or not your adolescent is facing an immediate challenge, they still need to know that you are available to support them. “Tell your children that you want them to come to you,” says Ericksen, adding that problem solving should involve their input. “Let them know that they’re in a safe place where you can work it out together.”

4) Own your feelings.

Parents know their children better than anyone else; therefore, acting simply on a hunch may be warranted. Avoid judgment calls that can be interpreted as anger. Instead, be honest about your suspicions, reiterate your concerns about their safety, and tell them how much you love them. “Honestly, what can they say when you tell them you love them?” says Ericksen.

5) Set consequences.

Ericksen recommends that you set a consequence that is simple, clear, and one that you will follow through on. If you are co-parenting, make sure both parents are unified on enforcing the consequence. Pushback from your child is expected, but don’t let defiance and cries of injustice wear you down. “When consequences are given lovingly, your child knows you care,” says Ericksen. “Discipline shows you care.”

6) Avoid compromising situations with a code word.

Until your child reaches maturity, parents need to provide structure that supports good choices. “Don’t put your child in compromising situations where they’ll get peer pressure,” says Ericksen.

Arrange for your child to stay with a relative if you need to be away overnight; ask a neighbor to alert you if he sees suspicious behavior while your child is home alone; and communicate your plans with the parents of your child's friends.

Create a code word or phrase between you and your child that he can use should he find himself in a dilemma and needs a way out. "So often, good kids find themselves in unintended situations," Ericksen says. "You're gone, his friends come over, and your child feels ill equipped to deal with the situation. Or he's out with friends and is getting pressured to do something he doesn't want to do. Let him give you a call, use the code, and make you out to be the bad guy."

7) Find support.

Ask the parents of your child's friends to share what's happening within your child's peer group. Routinely discuss concerns and expectations, such as curfews and grades with your spouse (and ex-spouse), and have them report any changes in behaviors.

If your child is exhibiting symptoms that need to be addressed, seek assistance from people trained to deal with youth at risk. "Working with your family doctor or school guidance counselor is a good start," says Ericksen. "They can do an initial assessment before a problem gets too big and will connect you with the appropriate resources."

8) Maintain relationships.

Time and energy are critical for building and maintaining a good relationship with your child – and the more effort you put in to getting to know your teens, the easier it will be to communicate with them in the future.

9) Schedule one-on-one fun.

"Arrange a time where it's just you and one child," says Ericksen. "Put it on your calendar, and do something fun. You'll be surprised at how much they open up." 

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