

Developing a Meaningful Relationship with Your Teenager

Handout

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Signs of Trouble

Alcohol or drug use

Many teens experiment with alcohol or drugs. And most parents have very strong values about drugs and alcohol. One drink might not lead to trouble for your teen. But it could if he's arrested for underage drinking, if he compromises his safety because his judgment is impaired, or if that drink leads to a pattern of regular or heavy drinking or drug abuse. If you're not sure whether your child has been drinking or using drugs, make a point to observe him when he comes home. Do you smell alcohol or marijuana on his breath or clothes? Are his eyes red? Is his speech slurred? Perhaps he's lacking concentration or coordination. It's a sign of trouble, too, if your teen ever drives while intoxicated or can't account for large amounts of money spent.

Depression

It's normal for teens to be sad from time to time. Marked mood swings or a dramatic change in sleep habits, though, may signal depression. Sudden weight loss or gain, not caring about appearance, or unexplained cuts or scratches are other signs to look for. It's also cause for concern if your teen talks about suicide or says things like, "No one would miss me if I were gone."

Extreme eating or exercise habits

This is the age when eating disorders begin. Your teen may be in trouble if she's preoccupied with dieting and not eating enough or not eating regularly. Eating too much or too often can also be problematic. Some teens with eating disorders over-exercise. They exercise several hours a day or become irritable if they miss a workout.

Poor school performance

Teens in trouble may have a sudden or serious drop in grades. Is your teen skipping class or school? Is he disruptive in class? Talk with the teacher or guidance counselor if you suspect this is a problem. If he's not turning in homework or is showing no interest in school, your child may be facing serious school performance problems.

Friends who are a negative influence

Teenagers need close friends. But friends who are a negative influence can lead your child onto the wrong track. Is she missing curfew when she's out with certain friends? Do her friends have a negative attitude about school? It's troubling if your teen's friends are abusing alcohol or drugs, have been involved in dating violence, or have ever run away.

Running away

Leaving home without telling anyone is cause for alarm. If your teen has ever run away from home, this is a cry for help and a sign that your teen isn't getting the support he needs.

Sexual behavior that worries you

More than half of today's teens are sexually active. Whatever your personal beliefs about sexual behavior, if your child is a sexually active younger teen, is having sex with multiple partners, or is showing symptoms of sexually transmitted disease, you should be worried.

Uncontrollable temper or aggressive behavior

Teens in trouble often lose their tempers or use violence to try to solve conflicts. Does your teen punch walls or destroy property when he's angry? Is he getting into fights at school? If he's ever been violent toward you or a girlfriend, your teen is in trouble and needs help.

Talking to Your Teen about Your Concerns

The first step in helping your teen handle the problem she's facing is to talk with her about your concerns. This may be difficult, especially if your family has been fighting or has not been communicating well. Even if you're communicating well, your teen may have difficulty talking to you about what's troubling her. It usually gets easier with time and practice. Here are some tips to help you get started.

- *Set up a time to talk.* Pick a time when you and your teen can focus on the conversation. Minimize distractions, like the television, phone, or household interruptions. Let your teen know that you want to talk because you're concerned about some of his behavior. Make it clear that this will not be a time to punish. It's a time for you to talk with each other.
- *Describe what you've noticed.* Be specific. You might say, "I've noticed that you've lost a lot of weight in the past three months." Be clear about why the behavior troubles you. Avoid comments like, "I told you so" or "How could you?" Instead, use "I" statements, like "I worry when you come home late, because it makes me think you might have been in an accident."
- *Encourage your teen to talk.* Ask your teen for her view of the situation. You might ask "How do you feel about the grades you've been getting?" Try putting the focus on teens in general, instead of on your own child. If you are concerned about drugs, you might say, "Do kids at school feel pressure to use drugs?"
- *Listen to your teen without interrupting.* It's easy for emotions to get in the way, but plan to stay calm as you listen. Try to see things from your teenager's point of view. He'll be better able to tell you the truth if you show respect for what he has to say. If you cut off the conversation, you won't learn what your teen is thinking and feeling.
- *Try to agree with your teen on a plan of action.* Use your conversation to begin solving the problem. What help do you need to address the problem? Would your teen benefit from seeing a counselor or talking to another trusted adult? Together, come up with a plan to involve others who can help you find solutions.

Supporting Your Teenager

As a parent, you *can* help your teen get through a troubled time. Once you have recognized that there is a problem, you are on your way to helping your teen handle it.

- *Get to know your teenager's friends.*
- *Help build your child's self-esteem.*
- *Encourage decision-making and responsibility in your teen.*
- *Set clear limits and consequences for your teen's behavior.*
- *Seek out support for yourself, too.*

Additional support:

- *Support at school*
- *Family doctor*
- *Member of the clergy*
- *Friend or relative*
- *Your company's employee assistance program (EAP)*

Practicing Positive Communication

Phrases that show acceptance

- “I like the way you handled that.”
- “I like the way you tackle a problem.”
- “I’m glad you enjoy learning.”
- “I’m glad you’re pleased with....”
- “It looks as if you enjoyed that.”
- “How do you feel about it?”

Phrases that show confidence

- “Knowing you as I do, I’m sure you’ll give it your best try.”
- “You’ll make it!”
- “I have confidence in your judgment.”
- “It’s a rough one, but I’m sure you can figure it out.”
- “You met lots of challenges in the past. I have confidence in your ability to meet this tough one.”

Phrases that focus on contributions, assets, and appreciation

- “Thanks, that helped a lot.”
- “It was thoughtful of you to...”
- “I really appreciate that you...”
- “I could really use your help with...”
- “Would you do...for the family?”
- “Your contribution really makes/made a difference.”

Phrases that recognize effort and improvement

- “It looks as if you really worked hard on that.”
- “You really thought through that carefully.”
- “Look at the progress you’re making.”
- “You’ve really come a long way.”

Phrases that show respect

- “I can understand why you’d feel that way.”
- “Your opinions show that you’ve thought this through carefully.”
- “I have a different way of looking at it, but I can certainly see why you’d think that way.”
- “I hadn’t thought of it that way before.”
- “That’s a very interesting way to look at...”
- “I respect your opinion because I respect you, but I see it differently.”
- “I see that it’s important for you to feel that way.”

Words that Work

Door Openers	versus Door Closers
I expect you to talk to me without using four-letter words.	Don't you dare talk to me that way.
I'm glad you told me.	How could you have been so stupid?
I am upset that you have not considered my needs.	You are incredibly self-centered.
I'm glad you have learned from the experience.	I told you so.
You'll need to follow through on this.	You never take responsibility for anything!
The state university that you are applying has standards for grades.	You'll never get into college with grades like that!
How do you feel about the grade you earned?	With the pitiful effort you put in, I knew you'd get a bad grade.
You have some difficult decisions to make.	You're headed for trouble.
I appreciate the time you took to clean your room.	It's about time you did something around here.
When you leave your things all over the house, I feel frustrated and embarrassed when company comes.	You're such a slob!
It sounds as though it is very important to you.	You can't possibly think I'll agree to that.
Our relationship is important to me.	All you ever do is fight with me.
It's important that you understand how critical this is.	I can't believe that you'll ever be able to get along in this world.
There are consequences to the choices you are making	This is the last time I bail you out.
It's important to me that you make an effort to be less negative.	I can't stand that negative attitude of yours.
Because it's something I feel very strongly about.	Because I said so!
It's critical that you call me when you are going to be late.	It was irresponsible and inconsiderate of you not to call me.
I expect to be treated with respect.	Don't you answer me back.

Talking to Your Teen about Sex

Take an Active Role in the Sex Education of Your Child

Helping a child to grow up to be a responsible, sexually healthy adult is one of our greatest challenges. But if you take an active role, you can meet that challenge. Research shows that teens are less likely to have sex at an early age, if they feel close to their parents and if their parents clearly communicate their values.^{1,2} Surveys also show that young people actually want to talk with their parents about tough issues like sex. They say they listen to parents more than anyone else about these issues.

Think of Yourself as Your Child's Coach in the Big Game of Life

You know the rules of the game. You know what's important.

- ***Look for opportunities.*** A good coach takes every opportunity to build a player's skills. Be alert to what your children are saying to each other. Use TV shows, movies, or advertisements to bring up subjects. Use any opportunity to find out what they really know, teach them, and let them know how you feel.
- ***Know what else they are learning.*** Do you know what is in the curriculum at school? Who is teaching human sexuality? Is it a trained, certified health educator? What else is being taught in faith communities or youth groups?
- ***Be prepared to respond.*** A good coach is ready for any question. There are many resources that can help you learn and prepare. Visit the websites below. Explore libraries or bookstores. There are whole sections on parenting, sexuality and relationships. Talk to friends, other parents and religious leaders. Remember, a good coach gets help when they need it.
- ***Pick your time and place.*** Choose a time and place that is relaxed and gives you some privacy, especially for in-depth conversations. When you are saying good night is a good time.
- ***Keep lines of communication open.*** A good coach is always "ask-able." It's okay to be embarrassed. This is very personal information. What's important is to be open, so that your kids feel comfortable and safe talking with you about sensitive issues. When they do, be honest. And remember, it's usually more important to listen than to talk.

- ***Practice, Practice, Practice.*** Don't just have "the one big talk." Young people need lots of opportunities to learn about life. Start early. Expect to talk with your child about sex for most of your life. If you mess up, there will always be another chance to do it again.

The Three R's of Sexuality Education for Parents

- ***Respect.*** Respect means different things to different people. Your teen or pre-teen is learning this too. Tell them that you expect them to respect others. Explain what you mean by this. Make sure they understand your family rules about privacy, physical touching, or using sexual terms in jokes or name-calling.
- ***Responsibility.*** Helping young people find the balance between freedom and responsibility takes time and effort. They need to learn that there are things that they cannot do until they are mature enough. They need enough life experience to handle the consequences of their actions. Teens need to hear how to deal with their sexual feelings in ways that fit your family's values. Be clear and consistent about what you expect of them. They will not know that on their own. They may be resistant because of what they see their friends doing or what they see in the media. It's okay to say, "Our values are different. This is how we do things in our family."
- ***Role Model.*** Whether we like it or not, we are the role models for our children. They learn about love, sex and relationships from the adults in their lives. What is important is how we deal with feelings, disagreements, anger and mistakes. Model for your children and teens what mature people do. If you need help, get it.

¹ Resnick, M.D. et al. (1997). "Protecting adolescents from harm. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 278: 823-832.

² Blum, R.W, & Mann Rinehart, P. (1998). *Reducing the Risk: Connections that Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health, Department of Pediatrics, University of Minnesota. pp. 16-20
 3Nickelodeon, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Children Now. (1998). "Talking with kids about tough issues: A national survey of parents and kids."

Source: <http://www.parentlinkri.org>

The information you provide below can help you become an effective sex educator for your teen.

A) I want my teen son to know the following facts about sexuality:

B) I want my teen daughter to know the following facts about sexuality:

C) The three things that I definitely hope my teen will *not* experience are:

Son:

Daughter:

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D) I have already done the following about A, B, and C:

E) I plan to do the following about A, B, and C:

Tips for Teens Using the Internet

Don't believe everything you see and read online – especially when you're communicating with strangers. It's very easy for strangers to lie about their age, gender, or intentions.

- Trust your instincts. If someone makes you feel uncomfortable, leave, or sign off.
- Be suspicious of any online users who want to know too much about you. Never tell anyone online where you live, what your last name is, the name of your school (or where it is), your phone number, password, or any other personal information.
- Do not plan to meet up with anyone you've met online, unless your parents agree that you can, and they help make the plans and go with you.
- Don't download any games or files from Web sites you are unfamiliar with. They could be carrying viruses that can seriously damage your computer.
- If you get suspicious e-mails, files, or pictures from someone you don't know and trust, don't open them. They can contain damaging attachments and viruses. Use the same caution with links or URLs (Web addresses) that look suspicious – they're not worth the risk.
- Never do any kind of financial transaction online without your parents' permission.
- If you get angry with someone online, leave the situation and cool off. Getting into online fights can get you in trouble. Remember, anyone has access to what you say online.

More Guidelines for Internet Safety: <http://www.parentlinkri.org>

Online Resources

Medline Plus – Adolescent Development

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002003.htm

Tips for Parenting Teens

www.parentlinkri.org

Can We Talk?

www.neahin.org/canwetalk/index.html

Talking with Kids about Tough Issues

www.talkingwithkids.org

The National Parent Information Network

www.npin.org

The National Association for Self Esteem

www.self-esteem-nase.org/reference.shtml

Family Contract for Online Safety

www.safekids.com/contract.htm

Books

“Parenting Teens With Love & Logic: Preparing Adolescents for Responsible Adulthood”, by Foster W. Cline

“Helicopters, Drill Sergeants, and Consultants: Parenting Styles and the Messages They Send”, by Jim Fay