

“Teenagers! Talking with Them about Difficult Subjects”

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What Research Tells Us

- Kids are ready to talk about today's tough issues before their parents.
- National surveys find that kids in families who talk openly about sex, drugs, relationships etc. are more likely to say they would turn to their parent(s) first if faced with a crisis.
- Kids want to know much more from their parents than just the “birds-and-the bees.”

Kaiser Family Foundation Study

- A new survey of parents and kids ages 10-15 conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, finds that many families are still waiting too long and not talking enough when it comes to what their kids say they need to know.

What teens want to know more about

- How to protect against HIV/AIDS.
- How to handle the pressure to have sex.
- How to know when you are ready to have sex.
- How alcohol and drugs might affect decisions to have sex.

You Have More Influence Than You Think

- What may surprise parents is that the issues they are not talking about-as well as even some they feel they have already talked about-are what their teens want to know more about...but most of the time they would not admit this!
- Parents have more influence than they may think. Believe it or not your voice is stuck in their head.
- The teenage conscience often sounds a lot like the messages they receive from their parents.

How to Talk to Your Kids About Anything

Introduction

- Raising a child is probably the most gratifying job any parent will ever have -- and one of the toughest. In large part, that's because times have changed. We live in an increasingly complex world that challenges us everyday with a wide range of disturbing issues that are difficult for teens to understand and for adults to explain.
- My hope is to provide, concrete tips and techniques for talking easily and openly with your pre-teens and teens about some very tough issues: sex, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol and drugs, and divorce.
- Some parents and caregivers may question the appropriateness of talking about such sensitive topics with pre-teens or younger children. Maybe you're one of them. But consider this: kids are already hearing about these issues from TV, movies, magazines in school and from friends. If you don't talk with them early and often -- and answer their questions -- they'll get their facts from someone else. And you will have missed an important opportunity to offer children/teens information that's not only accurate, but also in sync with your own personal values and moral principles.
- I don't presume to tell you what your values and goals should be. As a trained clinician, I can only help you clarify your own values, focus your own goals, and hone your own strategies.

1. Start Early

- Kids are hearing about and forced to cope with tough issues at an increasingly early age, often before they are ready to understand all aspects of these complicated ideas. Additionally, medical research and public health data tells us that when young children want information, advice and guidance, they turn to their parents first.
- Once they reach the teenage years, they tend to depend more on friends, the media and other outsiders for their information. As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to talk with your child about these issues first, before anyone else can confuse your child with incorrect information or explanations that lack the sense of values you want to instill.
- Take advantage of this "window of opportunity" with young children and talk with them earlier and more often, particularly about tough issues like sex, relationships, alcohol and drugs etc..
- If you have not already gotten started, do not despair. It is never to late!

2. Initiate Conversations With Your Teen

- While you want your teens to feel comfortable enough to come to you with any questions and concerns -- and thus give you the opportunity to begin conversations -- this doesn't always occur. That's why it's perfectly okay -- at times even necessary -- to begin the discussions ourselves.
- TV and other media are great tools for this. Say, for instance, that you and your teen are watching TV together and the program's plot includes a teenage pregnancy. After the show is over, ask your child what he/she thought of the program. Did he/she agree with how the teenagers behaved? Just one or two questions could help start a valuable discussion that comes from everyday circumstances and events.
- Also, when speaking with your teen, be sure to use words he/she can understand. Trying to explain AIDS with words like "transmission" and "transfusion" may not be as helpful as using simpler language. The best technique: use simple, short words and straightforward explanations.
- Use the language that comes naturally to you.
- If you have more than one child -- and your kids are widely spread -- try to speak with them separately, even about the same subject. The reason? Children of varied ages are usually at different developmental levels, which means that they need different information, have different sensitivities and require a different vocabulary. What's more, pre-teens/teens will often dominate the discussion, which may prevent younger children from speaking up.

3. ...Even about Sex and Relationships

- If you feel uncomfortable talking about such sensitive subjects -- particularly sex and relationships -- with your young child, preteen or teen, you're not alone. Many parents feel awkward and uneasy, especially if they are anxious about the subject. But, for your kid's sake, try to overcome your nervousness and bring up the issue with your child.
- Once again, your children are hearing about it both through the media, on the playground, and in the hallways and that information may not include the values that you want your kids to have.

4. Create an Open Environment

- Children/teens want their parents to discuss difficult subjects with them. However, your kids will look to you for answers only if they feel you will be open to their questions. It's up to you to create the kind of atmosphere in which our children can ask any question— on any subject — freely and without fear of consequence.
- How do you create such an atmosphere? By being encouraging, supportive and positive. For example, if your teen asks, "How many people get AIDS?" try not to answer with, "I don't know. Please just finish getting ready for soccer." No matter how busy you are respond with something like, "That's an interesting question, but I'm not sure. Let's go look it up."
- FYI: Don't worry that if your teen learns that you don't know everything, they won't look up to you. That's simply not true. Teens accept, "I don't know," and "let's go find out," and they are better responses than any inaccurate or misleading answers you may be tempted to offer.
- One more point: You don't need to answer all of your children's questions immediately. If your 12-year-old asks, "Mom, what's a condom?" while you're negotiating a tricky turn in rush-hour traffic, it's perfectly okay for you to say something like, "That's an important question. But with all this traffic, I can't explain right now. Let's talk later, after dinner." And make sure you do.

5. Communicate your values

- As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to be the first person to talk with your child about tough issues like drugs and sexual behavior before anyone else can confuse him with "just-the-facts" explanations that lack the sense of values and moral principles you want to instill. Likewise, when talking with your teen about sex, remember to talk about more than "the birds and the bees," and communicate your values.
- Remember: research shows that children/teens want and need moral guidance from their moms and dads, so don't hesitate to make your beliefs clear.
- If you are confused on how to define your values try this: Think about your sexual values or how you feel about your teen experimenting with alcohol and/or drugs. Write these thoughts and feelings down. What do you believe is "right"? What do you believe is "wrong"? Why? Where do your beliefs come from? Are they your personal beliefs, or are they based on what other people have told you or expected of you? Are you satisfied with these values and/or beliefs? Are there any you would like to reconsider or maybe even change?
- If other adults are sharing their childrearing with you, ask them to create their own lists. Share and compare lists. Keep your list handy as it will help guide you.

6. Listen to Your Child

- How many times do you listen to your children while folding clothes, preparing for the next day's meeting, or pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket? While that's understandable, it's important to find time to give kids your undivided attention. Listening carefully to your teen builds self-esteem by letting our him/her know that they're important to you and can lead to valuable discussions about a wide variety of sensitive issues.
- Listening carefully also helps to build a better understanding of what your children really want to know as well as what they already understand. And it keeps you from talking above our teens' heads and confusing them even further. For example, suppose your daughter asks you what crack is. Before you answer, ask her what she thinks it is. If she says, "I think it's something you eat that makes you act funny," then you have a sense of her level of understanding and can adjust your explanation to fit.
- Listening to your children and taking their feelings into account also helps you understand when they've had enough. Suppose you're answering your 12-year-old's questions about alcohol. If, after a while, he says, "I want to go play my video games" stop the talk and re-introduce the subject at another time.
- Body language is important. Stand or sit in a relaxed, non-threatening position. Avoid crossing your arms over your chest or placing your hands on your hips. Keep your facial expression open and inviting. Maintain eye contact (without staring or glaring) to show you are paying attention.
- Listen without interrupting, except to summarize what your teen is saying. You might say, "I understand that this party is important to you, and that all your friends are going."

7. Try to be Honest

- Whatever your child's age, they deserve honest answers and explanations. It's what strengthens a child's ability to trust. Also, when we don't provide a straightforward answer, kids make up their own fantasy explanations, which can be more frightening than any real, honest response we can offer.
- While you may not want or need to share all the details of a particular situation or issue with your child, try not to leave any big gaps either. When you do, children tend to fill in the blanks themselves, which can generate a good deal of confusion and concern.

8. Be Patient

- Often it can feel like forever before a youngster gets his/her story out. As adults, we're tempted to finish the teen's sentence for him/her filling in words and phrases in an effort to hear the point sooner. Try to resist this impulse. By listening patiently, you allow your teen to think at their own pace and you are letting them know that they are worthy of your time.

9. Use Everyday Opportunities to Talk

- It's important to try to talk with your kids about tough issues often, but there isn't always time in the day to sit down for a long talk. Also, teens tend to resist formal discussions about today's toughest issues, often categorizing them as just another lecture from mom and dad.
- Use "talk opportunities," moments that arise in everyday life, as occasions for discussion, your children will be a lot less likely to tune out.
- For instance, a newspaper item about teen alcohol and/or drug use can help you start a discussion about what is going on in your own son or daughter's world.
- A public service TV commercial can give you an opportunity to talk about STDs.

10. Talk About it Again. And Again.

- It is likely your teen will only take in small bits of information at any one time. They won't learn all they need to know about a particular topic from a single discussion.
- Let a little time pass, then ask your teen if he/she has had any further thoughts, questions or feelings about your conversation. This will help you correct any misconceptions and fill in missing facts.
- Finally, in an effort to absorb all they want to know, children and teens often ask questions again and again over time -- which can test any parent's nerves.
- Repetition is perfectly normal, so be prepared and tolerant. Don't be afraid to initiate discussions repeatedly, either.
- Patience and persistence will serve you and your teen well.

What if I Don't Agree With What My Teen Is Saying?

- Hear your teen out anyway.
- Wait your turn to talk.
- Remember that this is a discussion, not an opportunity for you to lecture.
- When you were a teen, did preaching, moralizing, criticizing, or nagging work with you?
- These tactics will not work with your teen!

DO NOT IGNORE ISSUES

- Ignoring situations will not make them go away
- While addressing difficult topics with your teen may be challenging, the potential consequences of not dealing with or not providing honest, accurate information to your teen now will, more than likely, lead to much more complicated conversations in the future!

Talking With Your Teen About Sex

- When parents imagine talking with their teens about love and relationships they often think or feel this should occur under ideal conditions.
- If teaching sexuality were like teaching chess, that might work but teaching sexuality is more like playing a video game. You're reacting to a constantly changing screen. Just when you think you have mastered the game you are pushed to the next level.
- Deal with issues involving sexuality as they arise and be as open and honest as possible.
- Listen closely if your teen asks you questions and look for cues that they have heard enough.
- Keep the flow of information at their level.
- Try to tailor your sexual education to the needs of your child. Some teens respond to talking, others like to do research on the computer, some like to read or watch videos.

What to Say When

- Early Adolescence (12-15): Provide more detailed information about body changes and puberty. Present topics like orgasm, pregnancy, birth control, STDs, the difference between what love is and isn't, self-respect, assertiveness, alcohol and drug awareness, the importance of delaying intercourse and alternatives to intercourse. Share your views on dating patterns. Talk about personal safety. Continue to reinforce your values.
- Adolescence (15-18): Provide information on safer sex practices. Continue to discuss assertiveness, peer pressure, alcohol and drug use. Talk about abstinence, reasons to delay sexual intercourse, alternative sexual behaviors. Reinforce information on STDs and birth control. Discuss ways to avoid sexual trauma (rape, abuse, harassment) and what to do if it does occur. Explain your values and why you hold them. Share your views on how to deal with people who hold different beliefs. Gradually allow for more independence and reinforce responsible behavior.

Information Included in Contraception Handout

- Condom
- Birth Control Pills
- Depo-Provera
- Diaphragm
- Cervical Cap
- Female Condom
- IUD
- Norplant
- Lunelle

Information Included in Contraception Handout

- Condom Cues
 - Emergency Contraception
- Methods that Don't Work Well**
- Rhythm Method
 - Spermicide-use
 - Withdrawal
- What Doesn't Work At All**
- Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

The 7 Most Common STDs

- Chlamydia
- Gonorrhea
- HPV or Genital Warts
- Genital Herpes
- Syphilis
- Hepatitis B Virus
- HIV

Talking to Teens About Alcohol and Drugs

- All teens need to learn the facts about alcohol and drugs.
- "Just Say No" is not enough.
- To make positive, healthy decisions teens need solid, accurate information not slogans.
- They also need to know their parents' values about alcohol and drug use.
- Talk to your teen about why you feel he or she should not use drugs or alcohol.
- Make sure he/she knows your local and state laws related to teen alcohol and drug use.
- Be aware of what you model with your own behavior around substance use.

Starting a Conversation About Alcohol and Drugs

- Ask your teen if/when he/she has been exposed to alcohol or drugs?
- At school? At parties? At the beach? At a friend's house?
- Ask if other kids they know have tried or are using alcohol or drugs (you will likely get a more honest answer if you keep this question general rather than specific).
- Ask if he/she wanted to use alcohol or drugs if he/she would know where to get it?
- Help your teen practice/brainstorm ways to resist peer pressure or exit uncomfortable situations.
- Let your teen know what you hope they will do if an alcohol or drug related experience presents itself.
- Deliver the message about any substance use and driving (drinking and driving) bluntly.
- Be wary of preaching a harsher, scarier antisubstance line than true dangers warrant. You risk a credibility gap. Again, teens are very fast to turn off adults when they feel they are being preached at rather than talked to.
- If teenagers feel, rightly or wrongly, that warnings are being overstated, they will lose trust and reject the whole package.

Tips For Divorcing or Divorced Parents

- Be sensitive, use self-control, and realize everyone's timetable is different in regard to the healing process.
- Encourage your teen to talk as openly as possible about his or her feelings about what has happened.
- Keep your feelings separate as most often children may blame you or the other parent for what they perceive as a betrayal.
- If you feel you are too upset to be of real help to your child look for other resources to assist your child with the process of sorting out their feelings.
- Many teens feel guilty and imagine they have "caused" the problem (especially if they have heard parents argue about them from time to time).
- **Don't bad-mouth your ex-spouse in front of your child even if you are still angry and feuding.**
- **Do not use your teen as a go between or messenger, especially when you are feuding.**
- Expect resistance and difficulties in helping your teen adjust to a new mate or the mate's children.
- Revisit these conversations (remember to make conversations about all difficult topics an ongoing process).

Resources

Books

- Bell, Ruth. (1998). *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives*. Three Rivers Press.
- Bradley, Michael. (2001). *Yes, Your Teen Is Crazy. Loving Your Teen Without Losing Your Mind*. Harbor Press.
- DeBord, K. (1997). *Parenting Teens*. North Carolina University.
- Fassler, D. & Dumas, S (1997). *Help Me, I'm Sad: Recognizing, Treating, and Preventing Childhood and Adolescent Depression*. Penguin Books.
- Gabe, Janice (1995). *Value Based Parenting*. New Perspectives of Indiana (Indianapolis).
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- Lippencott & Deutsch (2005). *7 Things Your Teenager Won't Tell You And How To Talk To Them Anyway*. Ballatine Books.
- Miron, A. & Miron, C (2002). *How To Talk To Teens About Love, Relationships, and Sex--A Guide For Parents*. Free Spirit Publishing.
- Riera, M. & Joe DiPrisco. *Field Guide To The American Teenager. A Parent's Companion*. Perseus Publishing.

Resources

Books

- Riere, M. (2003). *Staying Connected To Your Teenager*.
- Shaffer & Gordon. (2005). *Why Boys Don't Talk and Why It Matters*. McGraw-Hill.
- Shaffer & Gordon. (2005). *Why Girls Talk and What They Are Really Saying*. McGraw-Hill.
- Simmons, R. (2002). *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression In Girls*. Harcourt Books.
- Taffe, R. (2001). *The Second Family; Dealing with Peer Power, Pop Culture, the Wall of Silence—and Other Challenges in Raising Today's Teens*. St. Martins Press.
- Wilmes, D. (1988). *Parenting for Prevention: How to Raise a Child to Say No to Alcohol/Drugs*. Johnson Institute.
- Wiseman, R. (2002). *Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*. Crown Publishers, New York.
- Wolf, Anthony. (2002). *Get Out Of My Life But First Drive Me and Cheryl To The Mall*. Ferrar, Straus, & Giroux.

Resources

Web Sites

- www.talkingwithkids.org
- www.mtv.com (It's Your Life Guide)

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