

When the Conversation Is Difficult

Parenting can be uncomfortable. Confronting difficult situations with our teenage children, whose brains are wired to take risks, isn't always easy. Some events, situations, behaviors and choices during adolescence need to be talked out. We can help them understand through our conversations together what just happened, and what's next.

Teens lack experience; at the same time they crave it. When a teen's choice creates a tough situation, it may not be helpful to deem it reckless. While they explore the world, they can't anticipate the outcome if they haven't had the experience. What is deemed by adults as risky behaviors may be normal developmental exploration to prepare teens to make complex decisions. Research shows that the part of the teenage brain that makes decisions using logic develops at about age 25. Therefore, parents need to be patient while their teen is learning how to strengthen and develop those effective decision-making skills. Teens aren't typically able to see the consequences of their actions when making split second decisions. Sometimes teens need to experience mistakes to truly learn from them. Parents can help their teens learn from their mistakes to become better decision makers.

Prevention through shared expectations. Creating expectations before an uncomfortable situation arises can help create boundaries in your home. Also, for some teens, knowing the consequences that you will carry out may be enough to steer them away from taking certain risks. Expectations can be very effective when mutually agreed upon. So, it is important to take the time with your teen to discuss consequences of certain behaviors inside and outside of your home.

How can we begin the conversation? You may want to decompress before talking with your child. This can help to release intense feelings, preventing an overreaction. Intense emotions from a parent (for example, yelling, crying, threats) feels confrontational and tends to shut down a conversation. As the teen becomes more upset, the ability to listen and understand or learn is diminished.

Engaging in conversation with a teen who comes home under the influence of a substance is not an effective strategy. Say, "Let's talk tomorrow." The hours overnight allows them time for the substance to wear off, and for them to reflect on their behavior. Their remorse tends to grow as they await the conversation. Teens are sensitive to parents being the authority in their lives, and are less resistant to your parenting input and more open to talking if their view on their situation is welcome. The next day, don't talk down to them. Talk quietly about your concern.

One method of approaching the conversation involves the D-E-S-K formula:

Describe the behavior.

Express how the behavior makes you feel. Use "I" statements such as "I feel concerned because I love you and I want you to be safe. Please let me know if you will not be home at curfew..."

State what you would like to see happen. Your teen needs to know what you want to happen.

Know expectations around the behavior going forward: "Our expectations are that you won't be drinking or using drugs."

Just as parents want respect, teens want respect too. Teens are to be respected, and are allowed to make a mistake. Don't take away all their power because they are in trouble. If the behavior is a consistent problem, then establishing a mutually agreed upon consequence is preventive. It puts the control on them for the outcome of their choices. Put the power in your teen's hands, respectfully.

Breathe as the conversation winds down. Parent-teen relationships are collaborations. Caring conversation can help avoid power struggles. Point out things they did right in the situation. Teens learn not only from their mistakes but from knowing what they did right. Near the end of the conversation, check in with your teen with how you can help them or help them find more information. Express empathy for their suffering, so they know you not only as their parent but as a human. Knowing you believe in them can be a powerful motivator to make better choices.

77% of local high school students choose not to drink alcohol because they don't want to disappoint their parents



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