



PARENT INVOLVEMENT:

The Key to Helping Teens Make Wise Choices

Teens face tough decisions every day. While you cannot protect your teen from having to deal with peer pressure, you can prepare him to make healthy decisions.



- **START TALKING EARLY.** Often parents address difficult subjects like sex and drug use too late, partly because it is so hard to know when the timing is just right. The truth is that kids as young as 9, 10 or 11 face challenges about these topics on TV, in advertisements, and by peers. The earlier you begin talking about these tough issues, the better. “THE TALK” doesn’t have to be uncomfortable, or even a one-time event, if you have discussed sensitive subjects over time.
 - > **Talking about sex won’t be overwhelming if:**
 - Earlier conversations have taken place about healthy bodies.
 - You can talk about body parts without discomfort.
 - You have discussed self-respect.
 - You have used real-life opportunities as well as advertisements and television shows to point out how people can try to get others to do what they want through flattery and pressure.
 - > **Talking about drugs and alcohol won’t be overwhelming if:**
 - Earlier conversations have addressed peer influence.
 - Your child understands the importance of a healthy body. This can be emphasized in other discussions about nutrition and exercise.
 - You have helped your child to understand how advertisements manipulate her to want to use substances.
 - You have discussed healthy and unhealthy coping strategies.
 - You have modeled that you do not turn to substances as a way to manage your stress.
 - You have helped your child to notice when others’ lives have been harmed by the use of drugs or alcohol. Sadly, it is not hard to see people on the streets whose lives have been deeply affected by substances.
- **BE OPEN TO YOUR CHILD’S QUESTIONS.** Reassure your child that there is no such thing as a dumb question and that you are willing to talk with her about any concerns she might have.
 - > **If your child says: “Dad, my friend told me that using condoms can cause cancer. I didn’t believe him, of course. But...well, is he right?”**
 - You might say: “I’m glad you’re bringing this up. You were right. Condoms don’t cause cancer. In fact, wearing condoms can prevent some cancers, protect people from getting a sexually transmitted disease, and prevent pregnancy. Does that help answer your question?”
 - > **Let your child know that if you don’t know the answer to one of her questions, you can find the answer together using different resources.**
 - You might say: “I have to admit, I don’t know very much about the morning after pill that Kyra took. But I bet we can learn more at www.healthychildren.org. That web site has reliable information for parents and kids written by doctors and nurses.”

- **KEEP THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN.** Talk to your teen about your expectations regarding substance use and other risky behaviors.
 - > **Be open to discussing any topic - even if it is uncomfortable for you. Learn to listen.**
 - *“I know you may wish you could talk with your Mom about your periods. But since she is away, let’s do our best and figure out how you can participate in all your swim meets even now that you have your period.”*
 - > **Be prepared to answer questions about how you handled tough issues when you were your child’s age.**
 - You might say: *“Yeah, I did have friends who smoked when I was in 8th grade, but I thought it really smelled gross. So I just told my friends that if my Dad found out, that would be the end of me hanging out and they understood.”*



- **PRAISE YOUR TEEN’S HEALTHY CHOICES.** Give your teen opportunities to prove that he is responsible. In turn, be sure to reward his good choices with trust and well-earned privileges.
 - > **You might say:** *“I notice that whenever we get in the car you put your seatbelt on right away and you do not rush to look at your phone even when you know that you received a text. By doing those things, you are keeping yourself, your passengers, and others on the road safe. I’m really proud of you.”*
- **NEVER PUNISH YOUR CHILD FOR COMING TO YOU FOR HELP.** Teens will expose themselves to great risk, including being driven home by drunken drivers, if they fear that they will get punished for being in the wrong place or making unwise choices.
 - > **Have your child understand she will NEVER be punished when she avoids a dangerous situation by coming to you.**
 - Let her know that it will always be your job to guide her about how to avoid similar situations in the future. When she does call, take a few breaths and then congratulate her for being wise enough to come to you rather than taking a risk.

The following strategies may help you monitor your teen and allow her to “shift the blame” to you:

1. THE CHECK-IN RULE

- When children are small, parents are very involved in bedtime rituals. Unfortunately, parents and teens often keep different schedules and teens may come home long after parents have gone to bed. This presents a missed opportunity for both monitoring and important communication. It too easily allows teens to sneak in and hide their behavior.
- Make a check-in rule that your child must check in with you, no matter what time she arrives home. At the least, she has to kiss or hug you goodnight. You have to at least tell her that you are glad she is home safe and ask her if there is anything she would like to talk about. This can create a wonderful opportunity for some important conversations. **For this rule to work, it must be used every time, no exceptions.**

- Encourage your teen to use this rule as a face-saving reason to avoid alcohol or drugs.
 - > **Your teen might say,**
 - “I’m not drinking. My mom smells me when I get home!”
 - “You try dealing with my dad. He is always asking questions. I can’t get away with anything.”
 - “You know my mom, if I smoke she will figure it out and I’ll be grounded forever.”

2. “CODE WORDS”

- The “code word” technique is an easy way that your child can let you know that they need help getting out of an uncomfortable situation.
 - > First, you and your child choose a code word or phrase. It should be something you don’t normally use, that your child can easily slip into a conversation without his friends noticing what it really stands for (“Mom, I need your help.”).
 - > For the code word technique to work, your child must NOT share its meaning with his friends.
- Some ideas for code words might include:
 - > Your pet’s name
 - > Name of your child’s favorite food
 - > Name of a sports team
 - > Name of a household chore

3. CONTRACT FOR LIFE

- A “Contract for Life” states that your child promises to call home for a ride if there is any reason to believe driving (by him or a friend) may not be safe.
 - > See the Students Against Destructive Decisions Contract for Life website for more information: <http://www.sadd.org/contract.htm>
 - > A contract for life will likely be more effective if you also have a code word (see above). That way if your teen needs to call you in front of his friends he can do it easily.
- By signing the contract, you agree to:
 - > Give your child a safe ride home without any risk of punishment.
 - > Postpone talking about the unsafe situation until you both can talk about it calmly.

Follow the steps below to use the code word technique:

1. Your child calls you to let you know that he will be out late and inserts the code word.
 - > “Yeah, I won’t be home until midnight so I can’t walk Sparky.”
2. When you hear the code word it is your job to demand that your child comes home.
 - > “You must be home in the next half hour to take care of Sparky!”
3. If your teen has a safe way home he can leave, and blame it on his overbearing parent.
 - > “Sorry guys, I have to run or my Dad is going to kill me.”
4. If he does not have a safe way home, he will reject your instructions to return home.
 - > “No way, I’m not coming home until curfew.”
5. This rejection will prompt you to go and pick your child up.
 - > “Too bad. You are coming home now and that’s it. I’ll be there in 5 minutes.”
6. Have a discussion about what happened on your drive home or the following day. Don’t talk about the situation until you are both calm. Remember to congratulate him for making a wise decision.
 - > “I’m so proud of you for calling me and using our code word. Let’s talk about what happened at the party to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Sometimes the pressure to fit in is very strong. It is important to start talking early on with your teen about tough issues like sex and drug use. Despite teens’ best intentions, they may still make unwise choices unless they have a strategy that allows them to both do the right thing and avoid shame with their friends. One of the most helpful strategies is to be able to blame parents for their unpopular decisions. These strategies work best when friends know that a teen is closely monitored.

Thank YOU

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SOURCES:

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