

Navigating the Teen Years: Preventing, Detecting and Addressing Risky Teen Behavior

Teenagers. For some parents just the word conjures up fears, uncertainty, headaches and worries. Some are valid ; others may be overblown. Adolescence is a time of great change for a teen and his family. Many exciting and challenging opportunities and concerns present themselves during this important time. Teens are also exposed to a plethora of risky behaviors and dangerous activities. Laguna Beach therapist, David Lindquist, MFCC, addresses how challenging adolescence is on the teen, but underscores the challenge of parenting one well. "Being an adolescent is difficult; the only thing harder is being a responsible parent of an adolescent. "

Parenting an adolescent requires being prepared and staying informed. Parents who understand the physiological and emotional changes that occur during adolescence, the necessary developmental tasks this stage presents, what risks their children are exposed to, what they can do to prevent risky behavior, how to spot it early and what to do are better equipped to guide them to become healthy, caring and responsible young adults. Resolve, self-sacrifice, flexibility and patience are vital. The ability to keep things in perspective and maintain a positive attitude will help you for those times when the going gets rough.

At times, even the most loving and committed parents of teens feel overwhelmed and may not be able to discern normal teen behavior from troubling behavior that needs to be addressed. Knowing what is normal and healthy teen behavior from what is risky and dangerous is crucial in helping your adolescent safely navigate the teen years. Parents need to *learn what they can do to help prevent risky teen behavior*. They must also *learn the warning signs of troubling behavior* or a troubled adolescent which need to be taken seriously. Parents should understand that if they have concerns about their teen or his/her behavior, professional help may be needed and is abundantly available.

But how do you know if your child is involved in or headed toward risky behavior? And what can you do as a parent to minimize the likelihood of serious involvement in harmful behaviors and delinquent activity?

What parents can do help to prevent risky teen behavior:

It is important to realize that no matter where your child goes to school or where you live, your child will be exposed to drugs and alcohol, along with opportunities to engage in risky behavior or delinquent activity. Although peers become more important at this stage in your child's life, you still hold tremendous power to influence their choices, values and behavior. Use it! There are 40 Developmental Assets (www.search-institute.org) that actually help buffer a child from being involved in risky behavior. Highlights are included here.

- **Model responsible behavior.** By your actions and words you are constantly teaching your children your values and priorities. Your own habits regarding alcohol, drugs and tobacco communicate your views on those substances. At a recent conference at Columbia University on how to raise a drug free child, Ross. M. Brewer, M.D., assistant professor of clinical health and an attending physician at the Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York states "The first things

parents must do to create drug free kids is to lead by example. Through your behaviors and actions you are constantly communicating to your children.”In addition, your children are also learning from you how to handle difficult feelings, solve problems, how to treat others and themselves. It is vital that you value how powerful your role is to model responsible and mature conduct.

- **Engage with your teen.** Your teen needs you to be involved in their lives, even if they may make you feel unwelcome! Brower emphasizes the ability that parents have to impact their child’s decisions.” Parents have profound power, but they need to engage. “Stay involved in your teen’s life and maintain family rituals such as eating together. A recent large scale study, conducted by Michael Resnick and published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, found the presence of parents at key times during the day (early morning, mealtimes, after school)provided moderate protection against emotional distress for children, reduced the frequency of use of alcohol and marijuana and delayed adolescents’ initiation of sexual intercourse. Find ways to enjoy being with your teen. Remember what you love about your teen.
- **Know where your teen is at all times. Know what he or she is doing. Know how to reach them.** Children without adult supervision are at much greater risk of truancy, stress, poor grades, risky behavior and substance abuse.
- **Know your teen’s friends and their parents.** Parental monitoring of peers plays a large role in reducing adolescent delinquent activity. This includes drug use and risky sexual behaviors. It is important to share similar values with the parents of your teen’s friends regarding parental supervision, drugs, alcohol, driving, etc.
- **Maintain open communication with your child.** According to Joseph A. Califano, chairman and founder of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, he maintains that parents must keep the lines of communication open in order to be effective drug prevention agents. On your part this involves listening, a lot! In addition to addressing concerns make sure and verbalize to your teen positive behavior and attitudes that you notice in them.
- **Express your values and live by them.** Youth who have a strong moral center are less likely to engage in aggressive behavior and delinquency. In his book, *On Character*, James Q. Wilson emphasizes that the family is where the development of moral virtue or good character is effectively formed or left unformed.
- **Set clear rules and consequences for violating those rules. Make sure your teen knows them. Make sure they know the reasons to avoid drugs, alcohol, tobacco, risky sexual behavior and delinquent activity.** Most of us learn important life lessons from our mistakes and poor choices- teens are the same. You are still the most important teacher your child will ever have. Use their mistakes or poor judgment as learning opportunities, not as indictments of their worth. . In his book, *Wooden*, legendary coach and mentor John Wooden tells parents to teach their children, “Be true to yourself. You know what is right. Don’t let someone else decide for you.” Provide consistent parenting and provide positive feedback when responsible behavior is exhibited.

Authors John Wright and Francis Cullen underscore the role of parental guidance and rules and their effects on risky behavior. "Parents who are nurturing, reliable, and closely attached to their youth and who provide guidance in the form of rules and supervision reduce the delinquency of their adolescent."

- **Incorporate religious and spiritual practices into family life.**

In the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion authors Bruce Chadwick and Brent Top state, "the more religious a person is, the less likely he or she will be to participate in delinquent or criminal behaviors."

- **Learn about adolescence!** A teen brain is not fully mature. They need a fully mature adult to guide many of their decisions. In addition, many emotional, hormonal and other physical changes are occurring, while your child is trying to carve out an identity, be accepted by their peers, and deal with more adult types of issues- dating, employment, college, etc. As difficult as your child's adolescence may be on you and your family, remember, adolescence is also a stressful time for teens, and for some teens it can be very stressful.
- **Help your teen to understand their unique personalities, strengths and weaknesses.** Encourage your child to participate in extracurricular activities. Support their unique, pro social interests and hobbies. Help them to identify their talents, temperament and interests. Areas needing growth will be more easily accepted if they are framed as a part of every person, you, included! Your teen is figuring out who he or she is- it is called identity exploration. This process may lead to some annoying or irritating behaviors, but usually the less you battle over it the shorter they last. Choose your battles wisely- don't make them about blue nail polish or gel filled hair.
- **Find support for yourself as a parent of a teen .**This can be informal like friends or professional support. This will assist you in maintaining a sense of perspective and help you to see that you are not alone. Many parents of teens from all types of families need the support of others parents to stay sane!

Adolescence is a time of physical, social and emotional changes and identity exploration. It also provides many opportunities for personal growth, expression and experiences. Some are positive and assist a teen to grow and mature. Others are not. Parents may find it hard to decipher what is normal teen behavior from what is problematic. Orange County juvenile and family law attorney and former juvenile court referee Maureen Meehan Aplin states, "There are many warning signs for risky behavior and many underlying reasons that fuel the outcome of the behaviors. It is important for parents of teenagers to observe their children daily, question changes in behaviors, listen patiently to the rationale a teen gives for the changes, and to be present, forward thinking, and solution oriented when a teenager makes a mistake."

Below are some warning signs that need to be taken seriously, as they may lead to serious consequences and delinquency if not addressed early. The more signs your child has and the longer they have existed, the more important it is that they not be ignored as normal teen behavior. In addition, if the behavior is self-destructive or adversely affects others, your teen's behavior needs to be promptly addressed.

Warning Signs of Troubling Teen Behavior

- **Individual-**
 1. Physical- fatigue, sleep problems, repeated health complaints, low energy, large weight gain or loss, lack of coordination, sudden change in appearance
 2. Emotional/Cognitive- personality change, sudden mood changes, irritability, irresponsible behavior, low self esteem, poor judgment, depression, isolating from others , hostile, uncooperative, defensive, blaming everyone else for their problems, lack of interest and motivation , positive attitude toward problem behavior, conflict with authority figures, openly displays rebellion
 3. Behavioral=aggression, lying, secretive, stealing, trouble with the law. Therapist David Lindquist adds “Watch out for life getting smaller- quitting teams, dropping classes, losing friends, less interest in things that they were passionate about.”
 4. Sexual= early onset of sexual activity, unsafe sexual practices
- **Family**= starting arguments, breaking rules, withdrawing from the family
- **Peers**- change in friends , avoids positive peers
- **School**- drop in grades, disciplinary problems, negative attitude, trancies

Very Serious Signs that require immediate action

- Thinking or talking about suicide
- Abusing alcohol or drugs
- Abuse of animals
- Self-mutilation
- Driving Intoxicated
- Running away or threatening to run away

You notice some warning signs of risky teen behavior, but don't know what to do.

First, is, do not ignore the warning signs. Don't assume it is just a phase. Trust your gut if you think something isn't quite right with your teen.

Second -Talk to your teen. Stay calm and reasonable; speak from a place of true concern for his/her wellbeing. Get as much information from your child about possible causes for the changes in behavior, mood, appearance, appetite, friends, grades, etc.

Third, talk to a professional - a school counselor, your child's pediatrician, mental health professional, licensed therapist who specializes in adolescent issues, etc. Speaking with a professional may help you and your teen sort through problems and can assist you in determining the best course of action and what additional services may be needed.

Fourth, if concerns continue or are very serious, take action. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's research on causes and correlates of delinquency, “Interventions will be more successful if the child has not already begun moving along pathways to more serious delinquent

activity. “The action needed may take a variety of forms based on factors including the age and developmental stage of your teen, their maturity, type of problematic behavior, seriousness of the behaviors or issues, length of involvement in risky behavior, mental health, family dynamics, etc. Types of action include counseling for the teen, family counseling, anger management classes, youth diversion programs, parenting classes, psychiatric services, substance abuse treatment, residential treatment, etc. There are many low cost services available throughout the county. Contact 211 for more information on these services.

As dire as some of these aspects of adolescence may seem, it is better to be aware and prepared than to suffer the potentially devastating consequences of a failure to act. Most teens successfully navigate this time and become productive young adults. According to adolescent psychologist and author Michael Bradley’s in his *Ten Commandments for Parenting Adolescents*, “It can get really messy, it can be quite painful, and it can be very scary. But these things all end, and like with raising teens, mostly everyone survives just fine.” And remember, in parenting you are shaping the future. Former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, M.D. reminds us that “Life affords no greater responsibility, no greater privilege, than the raising of the next generation. “

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Teens aren’t always mature enough to understand or handle all of this- but we can and need to be.