

The Teen Years: Injury Prevention for Adolescents

Risky Behavior in Adolescents: Sex, Drugs, and Rock n' Roll

Adolescence: a period in your life when you've got boundless energy, everything is possible, there are no limits to dreams and desires, and the world is yours to explore. Why, then, do many adults want to forget this period in their lives? It's a contradiction—and that's what makes this period in a young person's life so emotionally laden, stressful, and difficult to comprehend—and in some cases, to survive.

This most awkward of times presents a challenge to parents, healthcare providers, certainly to the teenagers themselves, and, ultimately, our society. The adolescent experiences changes emotionally, physically, and mentally. He or she begins to both test the limits and strive to learn how to handle these changes. The biggest questions are those of identity: Who am I? Where do I fit in? Where do I belong? Who do I associate with? Unfortunately, identity formation oftentimes means a rejection of the closest likeness—the parents. During this stage, rebelliousness, mood swings, and oppositional behavior become the distinguishing developmental traits of a teenager.

The tendency for adolescents to not have the capacity to self-monitor or self-assess behavior, can, in some cases, prove fatal. Hence, situations like speeding, unprotected sex, and alcohol and drug consumption become some of the most disturbing consequences of unbound adolescent behavior. When adolescents feel invincible, their capacity to accurately judge their own behavior and avoid extreme risk is not yet formed. Effective communication can be an important tool in keeping your teenager safe.

Danger and Excitement

As the teenager transitions from child to adult, some adrenaline-producing activities, such as playing video games, become, in essence, real, once an adolescent gets behind the wheel or encounters a dangerous or hostile environment. The sensation from speeding in a car produces a rush of excitement, but the stakes are obviously higher, and the teenager oftentimes blurs and blends the steering wheel of an arcade game with that of an actual automobile.

Furthermore, the destructive and violent emotional stimulant of many video games, in combination with teenagers flexing and testing their strength creates situations wherein the adolescent may not shy away from a hostile individual, or a provocative stare. In the worst of

Content provided by Healthology

these cases, the adolescent will attack or provoke a hostile encounter with another person. The "bullying" or "retaliation" you see on the news or read about in the paper is fueled by that need to push the envelope of adolescent behavior, and to test this newly discovered strength and will. Furthermore, access to handguns greatly increases the likelihood of deadly consequences. Cigarette use, drugs, sex, and violence become avenues of expression for oppositional and risky behavior. So, what can you do about this self-destructive tendency in adolescents?

How to Respond to Adolescents

Raising children in general and adolescents in particular, is by far one of the most challenging yet fulfilling roles in life. And, unfortunately, there are no easy answers or guidelines to some of the more complex aspects of parenting. But one thing that should be considered as a top item on many parents' to-do list is effective communication with their kid(s). How you talk to your teenager, and how he or she communicates with others, will be a key component in both the continuing formation of the parent/child relationship and the possible safety of your child. This process of learning is the key in the development of a teen's safety principles and habits.

A natural reaction to many adolescents' disruptive, hostile, and moody behavior is to ignore or let them be. The problem with this approach is that you have effectively given in to only one part of the adolescent's needs—separation. But ignoring your teen makes you unavailable for guidance, support, stability, understanding, and safety that he or she needs from parents.

Self-Esteem

Your teenager's ability and willingness to comprehend and simply listen to your verbal communications and instructions will vary greatly. But there is a constant that runs through the entire childhood spectrum called self-esteem. Always keep in mind that communication is not about making less of a person, but making them more. In other words, keep communication constructive and positive. An adolescent who feels strong can face the challenges, successfully confront the obstacles, and effectively solve the problems of thorny situations they are likely to confront.

From a very early age, your teenager has developed the skills to assess your tone of voice, demeanor, and expression. Your son or daughter's capacity to instinctively determine the intention of a message is in part based on the early formation of your mutual dialogue. Breakdowns in communication begin to happen during pre-adolescence and, in some cases, at an even earlier stage. Many teenagers merely shut down their ability to integrate information or listen to your instructions and guidance due to their history of equating communication with loss of self-esteem. For example, an upset parent may be quick to say, "You never do anything right. You've always been difficult. You're going to be a loser if you

Content provided by Healthology

keep trying to do things your own way.” Messages such as these will not accomplish much—there is no praise, guidance, or opportunity to self-evaluate behavior.

Communication Guidelines

If you feel that maybe you have not been as successful as you would like in effectively communicating with your teenager, consider these guidelines for effective parent/child communication.

- Communicate equal parts praise and guidance/instruction.
- Communicate capacity and independence.
- Provide challenges they can manage, and when completed, they can feel a sense of accomplishment.
- Establish eye contact when communicating.
- Ask questions that develop critical thinking and self-assessment skills.
- Separate out love for the child, but not love for a certain behavior.
- Communicate the consequences of certain risky behavior, and have the child repeat back their interpretation of the message.
- Be consistent with your limit-setting and guidance. Never practice “do as I say, not as I do”, especially with using safety equipment or smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. Be a role model.
- Develop house rules and expectations that are clear and unambiguous.
- Always make time for your children before they seek time with you through inappropriate behavior.
- Give explanations when requesting behaviors on certain actions or activities.

Summary

Communicate with love and compassion, and also be aware of your own limitations, weaknesses, biases, and shortfalls. Remember, during adolescence your son or daughter is likely to remind you of their perceptions of your shortcomings and failures. Their ability to push buttons is even more of a possibility if they see some missteps and parental modeling that is less than acceptable from their perspective. Moreover, this is the moment to be able to communicate to your child that you also may have made mistakes, but that you always strive to do well by them and to try to keep them from harm.

Content provided by Healthology