

SUMMER FUN: CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEENS TO LEARN TO MAKE GOOD CHOICES

For our kids in middle and high school, summer is all about having fun. As parents, we're all for that, but we want our kids to be safe. It isn't always easy to communicate with them so that they will hear us, let alone heed us, and at the same time, teach them about making good choices along the way.

Being safe means at a minimum "not having to call 911;" it also involves understanding what risks there are in a behavior or action, and being able to make choices that reduce those risks. Families need to define being safe for themselves, in their own way. That's the first step in making sure that summertime is both fun and safe.

Teenagers are confronted with situations where making a safe and healthy choice isn't always the easiest, or the most obvious, one to make. Once kids enter middle school, your role as a parent role shifts through the teen years from setting limits and being in control to offering guidance and teaching young people to make good choices.

There is no clear rulebook for this process. Parents need to:

- o Provide emotional safety,
- o Give kids confidence both to act and to say no
- o Coach them in advocating for themselves,
- o Help them learn how to assess the relative safety of a situation
- o Encourage them to recognize when they need to reach out for help.

Teens and even pre-teens face a lot of pressure about fitting in with their peers. Often, that peer pressure involves unsafe behavior, like drinking. Beyond the obvious that underage drinking is illegal, there are others reasons why it is important for pre-teens and teenagers not to drink. Alcohol use and substance abuse can disrupt brain development at a critical stage of development. The pre-frontal cortex, which manages executive functioning, continues to develop through the mid-20s. Studies have shown that kids who begin drinking at younger ages have more problems with heavy drinking by the time they are seniors in college. There can be real consequences for engaging in risky behaviors that in turn can limit a teen's options in the future.

What can you do? Teens need support and guidance at the same time as they are asserting their independence; this often challenges their parents' beliefs and values. Rather than seeing these challenge behaviors as oppositional or defiant, parents can see these as opportunities to give their child's pre-frontal cortex a little workout. You are engaging in a spirited discussion or exploration of thoughts and feelings rather than a power struggle when you use phrases like these to engage your teen:

- Describe what happened?
- Why do you think this happened?

- Why did you react the way you did?
- How do you feel about it?
- What do you think could have helped?
- What support do you need from me?

Listen to your teens; allow them to describe what is happening in their own words. Ask questions that help you understand, not judge the situation. Coming from a place of curiosity rather than authority can feel unnerving and disruptive to a traditional parent-child dynamic. But consider this: what kind of boss gets better results from his employees, a tyrant or a leader? Schools focus on critical thinking via subject areas. Parents have the chance to work these same critical thinking skills in the social-emotional realm, helping kids to develop the people skills that are so essential in today's workplace.

This engagement lays the foundation for trust and for talking about choices. It's important to help teens understand the options and consequences of their actions. Letting a teenager make a decision and supporting them on carrying it out reinforces the message of personal responsibility. Later, follow up with a conversation about how things worked out. Family meetings are a great way to reinforce family norms. Over time, this modeling will help your teen make good choices independently as well as creating a space for communication and understanding in the family.

Remember, too, that we don't live in a vacuum. It's important to connect with the parents of your children's friends so that you are comfortable picking up the phone to make sure that a parent will be present at any gathering or party. In fact parents are liable under New Jersey state law: "...anyone who purposely or knowingly offers, serves or makes alcohol available to an underage person or entices or encourages that person to drink alcohol is a disorderly person. It is a violation of the law for a host to make their property available (including leaving the property in care of another person) for the consumption of alcohol by an underage person. There is an exception in the law for parents or guardians who provide alcohol to their child." (<http://socialhost.drugfree.org/state/new-jersey>)

By giving your teens the tools to make good choices you enable them to grow and mature while feeling confident about their decisions. And that sounds like a great summer for everyone involved!

Further Reading

Reality Therapy:

<http://www.wglasser.com/the-glasser-approach/reality-therapy>

Cultivating resourcefulness in teens:

<http://wymancenter.org/dont-fix-your-teens-mistakes/>

Helping teens make responsible choices:

<http://www.pamf.org/parenting-teens/emotions/responsible-choices/choices.html>