

Creating Happy, Healthy Teens

by Kim Olver

There is research that shows that the best outcomes result when parents provide a good balance between guidelines and expectations for their children's behavior and a positive, supportive relationship.

Parents are not meant to be their children's best friends but in order to raise happy, healthy teens, it is imperative to have a reasonably close relationship, at least as close as your teen will allow.

During this period in your child's life, he or she is attempting to separate from you by developing his or her own identity that is uniquely different from yours. Teens often find their parents' values conflict with the values of their peer culture and what they see in the media. While they are separating from you, they are being immersed in a world where almost anything goes.

The only way to maintain any influence during this time is by maintaining a positive relationship. This can be difficult because your children are doing things that scare you and may jeopardize their safety but you need to stay supportive and encouraging. One of the best things you can do for your teenager is to listen. Attempt to understand their life from their unique vantage point.

Ask your children questions and listen to the answers, without judgment. Teens need to know that you are interested in what they do and that their thoughts and ideas won't be criticized by you at every turn. Resist the temptation to correct everything they say. This will increase the likelihood that your teens will continue to talk to you.

That does not mean that you support their negative behaviors. It is acceptable and important that you let them know how their behavior affects you. If your child starts swearing, it is all right to acknowledge their right to do so with their friends if that is important to them, but you would prefer he or she not use offensive language in your presence.

The other part of what creates the most healthy teens is clear, consistent guidelines and parental expectations for behavior. That does not mean you should have strict rules and excessive punishment. During the teen years, your children are trying to navigate their way through a very confusing world with little parental guidance. It is a parent's responsibility to provide guidelines and expectations, without being a dictator.

Because your children are not in your presence all the time, you may not know whether or not they are following your guidelines but the simple fact that you have them has been shown to be very important. My teens knew I didn't like cursing, drinking and driving, drug use and disrespect of others. I wanted them to do their best in school but understood that academics were not nearly as important to them as they were to me.

My children tested the limits, of course, and I expressed my disappointment when they did. We always had conversations about how it was my job as their parent to keep them as safe as I could, while allowing them the freedom to explore their world independently.

Maintaining this balance of relationship and expectations provides exactly the right environment for your teen to practice real life decision-making, while still having the safety of the family when he or she makes mistakes or needs support.

When your teen violates your expectations, it is important to have conversations about what they were attempting to accomplish by violating your guidelines. Help them to see the danger in the choices they made and help them evaluate whether or not the behavior they chose will help them move in the direction they were attempting to go.

I was fortunate to have two sons who were interested in the FBI as a career so anything they did that skirted around legal issues, I was able to connect their engaging in that behavior hindering the likelihood of them getting into the FBI.

Teens like to know that their parents will keep them safe even if they struggle and fight any restrictions you have. Do not confuse their anger and disdain. This is often simply part of the process but deep down, they are appreciating that you care enough to keep them safe.

Empowerment Parenting provides a great combination of supportive relationships with boundaries and guidelines. It is a system that can help your son or daughter develop into the adult they were destined to be.