

How To Keep Your Teen Safe... Without Controlling Them

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As a parent, it's usually hard enough to talk with your teenager about day-to-day things without having to discuss issues that can be quite harmful to them. In today's society, our teenagers have more freedoms and are exposed to more stimuli than ever before. If not avoided or at least taken in moderation, many of these things can cause long-term serious physical, mental and emotional damage to teens. Here are just some of them:

- Drugs, alcohol and cigarettes
- School violence and gangs
- Teen sex and pregnancy
- Child abduction
- Violence on TV and video games
- The Internet (i.e. porn, hate sites, etc.)
- Driving (yes, it can be dangerous)
- Sports injuries and steroids

One of the most difficult jobs you have as a parent is to help your teen navigate through harm's way and experience a sense of invincibility (this is normal from a developmental standpoint). And yet, it's one of your most important roles. As kids become more independent at this young age, they tend to be more exposed to and involved in risky behaviors such as drugs and alcohol, speeding cars, unsafe sex and the like. All too often, these experiences, which your teen may feel are harmless at the time, can lead to tragic consequences, including such things as addiction, pregnancy and even death.

The alternative is not always very attractive either. If, for example, you simply prohibit your teens from making their own choices and "experimenting" with certain behaviors and activities, teens can end up pursuing these experiences even more, and become even more distant from you. If a teen feels as if you are controlling them—forcing them to do or not do certain things—it can sometimes drive him or her to be even more drawn to these dangerous elements ([see last month's article on defiance](#)). This can often lead to bigger problems than simple lack of communication or indifference with their parents. As a result, adolescents will often look to their peers for direction instead of their parents.

So, how can you feel as if you are keeping your child safe, without being overly demanding, domineering or just plain unfair? Can you give them guidance while still letting them make their own choices? Can you help them learn lessons while you're not around? Can you simply trust them to take care of themselves? Yes, yes and yes.

A simple way to ensuring a teen's safety is to get agreements on a few ground rules. Be interested in what they do when you're not around and who their friends are. Set a reasonable curfew for them. Ask them to share their good judgment. Insist that they call if they are out longer than expected. Get agreements that they won't get in a car with someone who has been drinking. Also, establish consequences if they do not meet your guidelines. Know where they are and whom they are with. Get to know your teen's friends and parents. Go through various scenarios and possible responses with them.

Creating such rules with teens leads to trust, acceptance and stronger relationships between parents and children. (Studies have shown that teens that have positive relationships with their parents are less likely to succumb to peer pressure and engage in unsafe activities.) When these guidelines are not set, youths have a harder time with peer pressure. The result is often making poor choices and getting involved in dangerous situations.

If you see your child/teen as bad, defiant or problematic, they are more likely to live right into your belief. If you believe, expect and talk to your teen as a responsible, loving, caring person, they are more likely to live into this belief. It's important that you're aware of what you believe to be true of your teen. It's a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. See and acknowledge their greatness, beauty, creativity, and brilliance... and watch it unfold right before your eyes. Not for your benefit but for your child's.

Here are a few more things you can do to assist your teen to make good choices and pursue safe activities:

1. Talk openly and calmly with them – Without trying to scare them, ask them of the potential consequences of consuming alcohol, drugs or cigarettes, having sex without protection, looking at porn on the Internet, driving too fast and other things. Do research together and talk about the potential consequences.
2. Ask questions of your teen – Find out what they are doing and really listen to what they have to tell you. Ask about their interests, passions and visions. Explore opportunities.
3. Give them praise – Even though you may think they don't want it or that they can't respond in kind because they're supposed to be "grown up and not need you," tell them how proud you are of them and what he/she means to you. Explain why you are concerned for them and that you're looking out for their health and well-being.
4. Respect their fears and concerns – All teens go through challenges and deal with some form of peer pressure. Understanding why they might be tempted to try a beer at a party or have sexual relations with someone is a way to empathize with them. Preparing for adult responsibilities and freedoms can feel very scary. If your life is the outcome, do they have something positive to live into?

5. Encourage them to talk with you – Remind your teen from time to time that they can talk to you about any problems they’re having. Your job is to help them however you can and not make them regret opening up.
6. Are you a positive role model? Teens usually imitate and are influenced by parental behaviors. What positive behaviors and language will your teen imitate? Are you practicing any unhealthy behaviors that may be harming your teen?
7. Expect responsibility – Give your teen chores and other tasks, and support them in doing their homework. What information, practices and experiences will help prepare them for adulthood (i.e. work, finances, relationships, family)?
8. Create a checklist and/or plan – Put together a checklist of things that your teen agrees to do or refrain from when you’re not around. Also, create a plan for what a teen will do if they find themselves in an unsafe situation. Role play responses to different high-risk situations. Brainstorm potential options and consequences.

While it is important for you to parent your teen (i.e. set guidelines, talk with them, etc.), it is just as important for you to empower and encourage them. That way, they will know boundaries before they encounter high-risk situations, while also experiencing your trust in them to make their own decisions. By believing that they can take care of themselves (left to their own good judgment), more often than not, that is exactly what they will do.

By providing some simple guidelines and expectations, giving them information about the dangers of drugs, alcohol, etc., teaching them about responsibility and values, encouraging their choices, and asking questions—and most importantly listening—to them, you are on your way to helping your teen navigate the often bumpy road of adolescence, and get them on their way to a healthy, joyful, successful and, yes, a safe adult life.