Street proofing teens 101

Look both ways before you cross the street; don't put your hand on a hot stove; call 911 in an emergency: by the time kids reach the teen years most know safety basics inside out. But the greater freedom and responsibility of teenhood brings with it new and important rules to learn about staying safe as a teen. Now is the time to arm your teens with information and insights to avoid dangerous situations and effectively cope if one arises.



Travel safe. Providing escort to and from every activity is passé to teenagers who may be embarrassed by mom or dad tagging along. So when it's finally time to let go, ensure your kids travel together. Whether going to a friend's house, hockey practice, or the park, insist they buddy up and stick to well-lit routes.

Teach teens to be aware of their surroundings—especially while they listen to music, which can prevent them from hearing cars or people. Most importantly, make sure they regularly call home to let you know where they are and who they're with.

Drive dutifully. Car accidents are the leading cause of death and injury among teens. Ensure the rules you set out are discussed in detail and are non-negotiable. Make up a parent/teen driving contract with your rules and expectations and the consequences for breaking them. Pulled over for speeding? The price, aside from the ticket, may be a one month suspension of driving privileges.

Remind teens drinking and driving is dangerous and unacceptable, and if possible, let them know you're willing to pick them up anytime-no questions asked. Teach kids to lock car doors and roll up windows, especially at night. Show them where to find the ownership and insurance, the emergency kit and contact information for breakdowns or mechanical problems.

Succeed at home alone. Your teen will begin spending more time home alone as the years progress. No matter how old they get, there are safety rules that never change. Make sure they keep doors and windows locked. Telephone numbers for neighbours, family members, and your cell phone and emergency services should be kept by the phone.

Make it clear they should only open the door to friends or family and must identify people through the peephole or window first. When answering the telephone, your teen should say "My mom/dad can't come to the phone right now," instead of saying you're not home. And they should never give out personal information.

Communicate. A good way to establish a trusting and safe relationship with your teen is through open dialogue. Talk often and remember to respect their worries when they ask for help, and to avoid jumping to conclusions. Stress how important safety is to you and explain that by touching base with you regularly, they build trust and alleviate worries.

All safety issues should be topics of conversation whether violence, drugs, drinking or sex. Don't forget teens are aware of these issues and often speak to friends about them. It's your job to offer solid information and solutions. Let teens know they can come to you about anything.

Establish boundaries. At this age, it's important to teach teens to speak up, speak firmly and get help if someone acts inappropriately toward them. This includes name-calling or other seemingly 'harmless' behaviours. Teens may feel unjustified complaining about these acts because they happen so frequently. Assure kids anything that makes them uncomfortable or is unwanted is not okay and that they should tell the person bothering them to stop and tell a trusted adult or parent.

Date safe. For many parents, the dread of teen dating has been on their mind for years. A study on teens found that 54 per cent of women ages 15 to 19 and 13 per cent of men had experienced sexual pressure in a

dating relationship. So equip your teen with safe dating knowledge: make sure they stay in public places and have their own money for an alternate way home.

Talk about how drugs and alcohol impair judgment and encourage your teen to **never** take either. Discuss peer pressure and make sure they are confident in their ability to say "no" and to end a date early if they feel uncomfortable.

Be web savvy. With the prevalence of the internet age, online protection such as parental controls, spam blockers and firewalls have become important. Talk to your teens about the anonymity of the net, and that the 14-year-old boy your daughter is chatting with might actually be a 50-year-old man.

Safety rules including not giving out personal information, reporting harassment or inappropriate behaviour and never agreeing to meet anyone online should be established. Keep the computer in an open, accessible place so you can monitor use.

The adolescent years can be a trying time for parents and teens. Prepare them by talking to them about safety and repeating these messages often. By creating an atmosphere of open communication and honesty, you'll ensure your teen takes those first steps toward independence safely.