The big talk: communicating with adolescents about serious issues

For many parents, the idea of talking to kids about tough issues like sex and drugs may seem more uncomfortable than asking the boss for a raise. With the amount of media surrounding the subjects in school, you may be tempted to back away from the conversation in the hopes that "they already know most of it anyway." But unlike other difficult conversations you may avoid having, talking to your kids shouldn't be stalled.



Media influence

Children are growing up faster and as parents, it can be a daunting challenge to understand what they're going through. The Internet, TV, media messaging and other social media are difficult to monitor. Young people are exposed to images and messages their parents would never have seen at their age. While the media machine may seem overwhelming, its daily influence only adds to the importance of talking to your kids about big issues.

Teenagers often turn to their parents, guardians and friends as their main source for sexual health education, yet only a small percentage of kids actually learn about sex from their parents. With movies delivering "adult only" themes direct to your living room, you need to be upfront with your teen about uncomfortable topics and not allow the media to be their guide. And as adolescents begin to explore their sexuality at a younger and younger age, opening the lines of communication sooner rather than later is vital.

Peer pressure and self-esteem

Adolescence is a difficult time for most, and few adults would wish to repeat it. The pressure to fit in and the desire to please friends present youth with difficult choices at a time when they are most vulnerable. A healthy self-esteem and a supportive family environment can give kids the solid foundation they need to say "no" to negative outside influences when the pressure is on. Build a supportive and confidence-boosting home environment by:

Making every moment count. Take the time to talk with your adolescent on a regular basis, whether it's a chat over ice cream or turning down the stereo and optimizing time in the car.

Focusing on the good. Give kids the praise they deserve. Reward good behaviour and don't dwell on past mistakes. Teens need to know you like them and that even though you may not agree with them all the time, you are on their side. Often this is what gets teens through those difficult years and allows them to develop open relationships with their parents.

Staying positive. Try to remember how you saw the world when you were a teen trying to carve out an identity for yourself. Don't take your teen's moods personally and try to remember how difficult it was to be in their shoes. Instead of getting bogged down by petty arguments, work on reinforcing positive behaviour and keep your expectations reasonable.

Starting the dialogue

When you feel it's time to talk to your child about a serious topic, remember that it doesn't always have to be an awkward "sit down on the couch" type of lecture. Help keep everyone comfortable and open to communication on serious subjects by:

Brushing up on the basics. Do some homework of your own before beginning discussion of a serious subject with your teen. After all, it's not wise to start a conversation that you can't finish because you're not well informed or caught unprepared. Ask a healthcare professional or counsellor for more information that

you can arm your kids with if they resist conversation. Then, if your child is reluctant to talk, you will still have something to offer them. Be sure to remind them you are there to help and to answer questions.

Keeping it age-appropriate. Different ages and stages require a different approach, so be sensitive to the issues that are relevant to your child now. Ask kids pointed questions to determine how much they already know and how accurate the information they've received is.

Creating time to talk. Talking about important issues with your teen can take place anywhere. Begin a conversation when you have a moment alone. Use your time as "chauffeur" to its full advantage. Ask adolescents about their day while driving to soccer practice or bring up a story you read in the paper on your way to the mall.

Don't leave them hanging. After talking to kids about important issues, make sure you clearly communicate acceptable boundaries or limits. If, for example, you have set guidelines for safe Internet use, write them down and post them on the fridge. Remember to communicate why these guidelines are important.

Talk tips

Entering a dialogue on serious matters with your teen can sometimes feel like entering a war zone. Parents prepare their defence in anticipation of open fire and can easily get caught up in the battle. It's easy to walk into a conversation about a serious subject with good intentions and walk out feeling like you've just made the situation worse. Keep these tips in mind when communicating with your adolescent about tough topics:

Focus, focus, focus. Give your undivided attention to kids when they need to talk. Turn off the radio, TV or BlackBerry, look them in the eyes and listen. If the lines of communication are already open, your teen will be more likely to turn to you—and not somebody else—when problems arise.

Keep your cool. When touchy issues arise, such as dating or curfews, it can be easy to lose your cool. Try to maintain your calm and look at things from your teen's perspective. Avoid lecturing, but remember that you are ultimately responsible for setting the guidelines for your child's behaviour.

Mind your manners. Would you listen to someone who laughed at your ideas, or who wouldn't let you finish a sentence? Talk to teens the way you'd like to be spoken to, and remember to act as a parent.

Choose your battles. Adolescence is a time when youth develop a greater sense of independence and self identity, so choose your battles wisely. Bend on smaller issues, such as fashion differences or music preferences, but remain firm on issues such as drug use and alcohol. If your child feels like you are critical or judgemental, he or she may not confide in you when coping with a more serious problem.

Agree to disagree. You don't always have to agree with the viewpoints your kids are expressing, but respecting their ideas will create a safe place for them to share their feelings openly without fear of judgment.

Raising adolescents can seem like an overwhelming, exasperating and thankless job at times. You may not always feel comfortable broaching serious subjects during this challenging time, but it's worth it. Helping kids deal with difficult choices now is an investment in their future. Remember you are not alone; many parents struggle with raising kids and developing a balance between enforced boundaries and supporting them as they forge out their own independent identity in a move towards adulthood. By staying focused, supportive and positive, however, you'll help kids stay level-headed and safely ride out the often bumpy road of the teen years.