

STAYING INVOLVED IN YOUR TEEN'S LIFE

To be effective, parents need to be involved in their children's lives. While this is important at each stage of development, parents need to be especially concerned during adolescence, when their teens strive to gain greater freedom and independence.

Research has shown that an effective parenting style employs a reasonable amount of control and consistency, coupled with parental warmth and support. This type of parenting has been associated with positive outcomes in children. Problematic parent-child relationships are characterized by low levels of parental acceptance and control. One of the factors contributing to the delinquency of teens is insufficient monitoring by parents.

Monitoring means keeping track of your adolescent. This practice entails being able to answer these four questions at all times:

- 1) Who is your teen with?
- 2) Where is he or she?
- 3) What is he or she doing?
- 4) When will he or she be home?

As soon as this practice becomes habit, monitoring can serve as a foundation to build other parenting skills.

How can you know the answers to the four questions without interviewing your teen each time he or she walks out the door?

Talk With Your Teen

Monitoring means being involved in your teen's life. It includes being an interested, active listener. Just by listening to the accounts of your adolescent's day, you can show him that you genuinely care about what happens to him. It may only take 15 minutes a day of your *undivided* attention to learn about your adolescent's daily events. Listen carefully. What classes does she like? How are things going with his friends? What problems is she having? Building a positive relationship will help you monitor your teen's activities without seeming intrusive.

Manage Your Teen's Freedom

Adolescence is a time when youth want more freedom to "spread their wings." As teens learn the process of managing freedom, parents need to monitor their progress. Adolescents should earn their right to more freedom. With freedom comes the responsibility to endure the consequences of choices. As teens demonstrate responsibility at one level of freedom, parents can help them move to the next level by giving a little more freedom. For example, before your adolescent can stay home alone during the weekend, you may want to have some practice runs during the week. If your adolescent can handle shorter periods of time, such as one evening alone, then he or she may be ready to move to the next level.

Permissive parenting (little control) has been found to be associated with behavior problems. Studies have shown that it is better to give too little freedom than too much. Remember, it is the parent's responsibility to decide when the adolescent is ready to move to the next step, and to define that next step.

Set Clear Guidelines

Even though they can handle more responsibility than younger children, teens still need some boundaries and limits. It is important that teens know exactly what is expected of them. After discussing the rules, you may even want to write them down to avoid discrepancy over what was said.

Stay in Touch With Your Teen

If your children are supposed to be home at a certain time, plan to be home at the same time. If you can't be there, call to check on them or have a trusted neighbor check on them. Unsupervised

children are less likely to get into trouble if parents keep in touch with them.

Get Your Teen Involved in Adult-supervised Activities

Find out what school and community resources are available. You might check into organized sports, youth organizations, or after-school programs. Make your home available and inviting to your teen and his or her friends. It is easier to keep track of your children when they are at home.

Set a Good Example

When you go out, let your children know where you are going, how long you'll be gone, and a number where they may reach you. This provides an excellent role model of considerate behavior.

Keep a Family Calendar

Have a space where all family members can write down their meetings, appointments, and activities. This helps family members keep track of one another; it also provides a form of communication.

Talk with Your Teen's Teachers

Find out how classes are going, and what problems your teen might be having.

Meet Your Teen's Friends

Much of your teen's behavior will be influenced by his or her peer group. Studies have shown that adolescents who have a lot of unsupervised time on their hands are at risk for developing deviant peer groups. Under the influence of deviant peers, your teen could develop a variety of problem behaviors. Get to know your child's friends; better yet, get to know the parents of your child's friends. Both are a valuable source of information.

There are several barriers to monitoring. For example, parents dealing with major stressors, such as marital conflict, unemployment, and illness, may find it difficult to devote the needed time and energy to effective monitoring. Daily stressors, such as finances, work hassles, and home maintenance, may also provide obstacles. Some parents don't think it is important to know the whereabouts of their teens. Other parents don't think they can control their teens. While all of these things can be barriers to monitoring, parents can learn new strategies to develop monitoring skills.

All adolescents will try new experiences, and even make some mistakes. That is why it is up to parents to provide them with the experiences that will help them make the right decisions when influenced by peers. Monitoring does take a parent's energy, time, and attention, but the outcomes are well worth the effort!

References:

Benson, P.L., Galbraith, J., and Espeland, P. (1995). *What Kids Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Raise Good Kids*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.

Patterson, G., & Forgatch, M. (1987). *Parents and Adolescents Living Together*. Eugene, Oregon: Castalia Publishing Company.

Sachs, Shannon L., *Families Meeting the Challenge: Staying Involved in Your Teen's Life*. The Ohio State University Extension.

Diana Converse, M.S., Family Life Educator
University of Florida Extension Service
5339 S. County Road 579, Seffner, FL 334584
(813)744-5519 x 140