

# How to talk your teens out of all the bad decisions we worry about...

We can't over-promise here! You may be able to talk your teen out of that tattoo, piercing, boyfriend, party etc and you may not. But it's important to know that your teen doesn't always do things on the spur of the moment. A lot of thought often goes into these big decisions, and that's where you can have a real impact.

## SOME GENERAL ADVICE

- Believe it or not, when we have positive relationships with our kids, they want to please us and do care about our opinions. Allow your teen to be as independent as possible with the things they really care about, which is the start of them becoming more autonomous.
- Your teen's big decisions will go beyond sex, alcohol and tattoos – they might decide to explore veganism or support a political party you don't agree with. While we might worry, these choices are a positive part of their search for identity. Adolescence is when we assert our values with our actions. In fact, some of your teen's new values may rub off on you! We know lots of parents who have made positive changes, thanks to their teen.
- Chat about 'values' – what do you and they stand for/believe in? You may not agree with every decision they make, but just be interested, rather than judgmental. E.g. "Wow, I'm surprised by that, but I'm keen to know more".
- Hiding things from parents is actually really stressful for kids. Be supportive, be open, try to be non-judgmental and they won't have to. It saves them a lot of worrying and while they might tell you things you would rather not know, it's better you do!

## APPEARANCE AND BODY STUFF

- Tattoos, piercing, hair colours, clothing etc are all related to your teen's body. It is their body and you've probably taught them (wisely) that they are in charge of this. So where possible, support them with decisions and help with research so you can minimise any regrets.
- Regardless of whether a decision has been made, relate to your teen as they are now. Try to avoid emotional statements like "Don't you know tattoos are permanent?" or "You'll never get a job with that!" Tattoos are pretty permanent but there is always laser treatment and there are tattoos across all industries. Teens know all this.
- Ask if they'd like to talk to others with similar experiences (e.g. tattoos they love or hate).

## SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

- Most of what kids learn about sex comes from magazines, the internet and friends. It might be a good idea to have some open conversations about sex, reassuring them not to do anything they're uncomfortable with, and letting them know that they can talk to you if they ever need anything or have any fears/concerns. Make yourself available.
- The ultimate thing we want to know is that our kids are safe, so stay caring. It's better that they don't go undercover with these big decisions, suffer alone after a break-up, or stick with a relationship just to defy you (when we wave our finger, that suitor we're unsure about becomes even more appealing!). Instead, try: "I don't like the way Josh speaks to you, and I think you deserve to be with someone who treats

you better. But I know it's your decision, and I respect that."

- There will be times when you say 'no' and they'll listen and there will be times when you say no and they won't. Try to avoid ultimatums – what happens if they do it anyway? (Please ensure this isn't 'not speaking to them' for the next 15 years. This does happen, and it's awful for them, but also awful for you.)

## DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Research says that the longer drinking alcohol can be delayed the lower the risk of adverse outcomes (Ministry of Health, 2018). But the question is, how? We've heard some great ideas such as:

- When the 'party' comes up and they 'can't miss it', have something else available that's unmissable, e.g. camping, tramping, holidaying, etc. Aside from giving a strong alternative, a good excuse can ease the peer pressure on them to attend.
- Encourage family time or an activity or sport that means getting up early or Saturdays and Sundays, and makes the party less doable/appealing.
- Talk to your kids about their goals and discuss how drugs and/or alcohol might impact these – come from a place of inquiry rather than "expert" and do your research together.
- Lecturing, using scare tactics and 'banning' are a sure way to start conflict, and are more likely to push the behaviour 'underground', which can lead to unsafe situations.

**WHAT DO THE PROS SAY?**

- Teens need a balance of support and monitoring, so they can find their own way while being guided in their transition to adulthood. We can still help them to think about and learn from mistakes, but it's reassuring to know that the majority of teens make this transition in positive ways, aligning themselves with strong morals and values, and building positive relationships (Nobilo, 2017).
- Adults have the single greatest influence on teens' perceptions of their skills and capabilities, so one of the best things we can do is to focus on our teen's strengths and positive qualities. Teens need adults in their lives who are involved, interested and able to reinforce that they are a person of value, and matter a great deal (Nobilo, 2017).
- Research says drug and alcohol use is so prevalent in adolescence because of the brain's desire to take risks, so consider adopting 'natural' risk-taking alternatives. And before you tell your teen they're off skydiving, this can be as simple as learning something new, playing sport, taking part in a play, or making a speech. It's simply about encouraging your teen to 'take part' and get that rush of endorphins in healthier ways (Young, 2017).
- It's important to know that our brains aren't fully developed until around the age of 25 (Gluckman, 2017). Parents sometimes have unrealistic expectations of their teens, which can lead to us being harder on our teens – like they're lesser beings or stupid. This is not the case (Nobilo, 2017).

- The main areas of the brain that are still developing are those associated with problem solving, decision making, rational thinking, planning and thinking through consequences (Nobilo, 2017). This doesn't mean that you need to stop your teen from doing things, rather that they might need support, guidance, understanding, reminders and importantly the ability to practice these skills.
- Speaking of practice, if you want your teen to make 'good' decisions, give them opportunities to learn! Whether it's planning and cooking meals, choosing an activity for Saturday afternoon, or even deciding and organising the family holiday (Lerner, 2007). This might be nail-biting at first, but teens have heaps to offer!
- Make time to talk. Research shows that the one thing that will have the biggest positive impact on a family, is to sit down and have tea together (with the TV off!). It may take a while to 'talk' if you're not used to this, but over time you'll learn a ton about each other (Lerner, 2007).
- Adolescents are more sensitive to our (or others') reactions (Nobilo, 2017), so if they've made a decision you don't agree with, they will 'feel' this more intensely.
- If you feel some boundaries need to be put in place – we spoke with Dr Sue Bagshaw from 298 Youth Health and the two parenting books she highly recommends are:
  - o The Good Teen by Richard M Lerner – but please read the whole book, not just those final chapters on the worst-case scenarios.
  - o Engaging Adolescents by Michael Hawton.

**WE ALSO RECOMMEND**

- Anything by Daniel Siegal – he has a specific teen book 'Brainstorm', but plenty of YouTube clips and his own [website](#) – go to videos for plenty of great viewing if you know you'll never get around to the books!
- The [Reach Out](#) website is great too – check out their video on Drugs and Alcohol, and their page on [supporting your teen with risk-taking behaviour](#)

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