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Teens Making Choices: Communication is Important

By Rosalie Bakken, Adolescent Development Specialist

Today’s youth are faced with many tough choices about behaviors, values and goals. Some choices have long-term consequences, and we all hope our youth will make wise decisions, especially when the future is at stake.

Adults can help prepare youth to make good, healthy choices. Open communication is vital to healthy parent-child relationships. The following tips may help you communicate with your adolescent about decision-making. A good starting point is to think about your own teenage years.

1. Consider your own experiences as a teen. Think of a time you had to make a difficult decision and what you learned from that experience. How did you feel? Describe one example.

2. Think of a specific time in the past when your child or teen did a good job of making a difficult decision. What was the situation?

What helped your child make a good decision in this case?

Now, next time your adolescent has to make a difficult decision, remind her or him of that instance. Mention that you really admired the way that decision was made. Help your youth recall how it felt when they knew they were making the right choice. They may recognize that same “gut” feeling in the future, and it will help them feel confident about their decisions.

3. When youth have decisions to make, encourage them to work through possible choices and outcomes of each choice. A written list can help youth to see the whole picture at once and make comparisons.
4. Some difficult choices do not have to be black or white. Many times, a compromise can be made, or an entirely new option can be created.

Example: Your teen is invited to attend a party where alcohol may be served. If she goes, she will be pressured to drink, may be arrested, get hurt, etc. If she does not attend, she will feel alienated from friends and bored. What are some creative alternatives to simply going to the party or staying home bored?

5. It is normal for teens to rely on friends for advice, especially on social matters. Don't try to prevent teens from listening to friends. Instead, encourage them to talk about the advice they get from friends before following it. Ask your teen:
 - What is the friend's advice?
 - Would the friend follow that same advice if the situation were reversed?
 - What are the reasons behind a friend's advice, both obvious and deeper reasons?
 - How might other friends' advice be different, and why?

By helping adolescents to think about difficult situations from various points of view, you build their awareness of the complex emotions involved even in simple decisions. By talking with teens and listening carefully, you show that you respect them. This, in turn, will encourage them to listen to you and respect your opinion.

Source

Russell, S. & Bakken, R. J. (February 2002). *Development of Autonomy in Adolescence*. NebGuide G1449. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Extension Division.

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