



Preventing tween behavior problems

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Last summer while we were visiting family, my then 12-year-old daughter, Anna, and her cousins went to a neighbor's BBQ to hang out with their friends under the watchful (or so we thought) eyes of the adults there.

Less than an hour later, they were back at the house. What happened, we asked? "Some kids were sneaking beer and getting drunk, so we decided to leave," the girls said.

Yes, we were relieved -- and grateful that our kids told us what happened. Still, I couldn't help but worry: Could Anna resist the same temptations when she was a teenager? After all, at 14, I was smoking, drinking, and going out with the biggest pothead at school (who, luckily for my mother, dumped me after a few weeks).

Sure, I came out all right in the end, but who wants to go through the lying and sneaking around again -- this time from a mom's perspective?

It also doesn't help calm a parent's fears when every stat about teen behavior is scarier than the last (like the ones from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showing that one in every four teenage girls has a sexually transmitted disease and more than half of all teens have engaged in oral sex).

Your tween is probably already spending more time with his pals and less time with you. Sooner or later, he'll face pressure to try a beer (or five), a joint, or "hook up" with a girl. So are there things you can do now to prepare your tween for that?

You bet, say moms and experts. The key: building a close relationship. "That way, you'll have more resources to draw upon later, especially during conflicts," says Christy M. Buchanan, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Wake Forest University and the mom of teens.

"It's completely normal for kids to spread their wings and test their limits," adds Kenneth R. Ginsburg, M.D., a professor of pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *Building Resilience in Children and Teens*. "They need to figure out who they are -- and who they are has to be different from you." Although you can't control the conflicts, you can maximize the chances that your soon-to-be teen won't get into the really bad stuff. Here's how:

Raise your expectations

"Teenagers live up or down to our expectations," says Dr. Ginsburg, a dad of teenage twins. "If you expect negative behavior, kids will behave accordingly. But if you expect compassion and thoughtfulness, that's what you'll get."

Sounds too good to be true, right? Research even bears it out. A study by Buchanan published in the Journal of Research on Adolescence surveyed 250 sixth- and seventh-graders and their moms and found that the moms who expected their kids to take risks and test limits later on tended to get what they bargained for.

And while parental expectations are just one of many influences on a teenager's behavior, Buchanan says raising yours can make a difference.

Why? Buchanan has several theories. First, our assumptions may tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies because of the way we interact with our kids, she says. So if you think it's inevitable that your child will get into trouble, then you're probably less likely to believe that what you do matters -- and you may not try as hard to monitor or discipline him.

Buchanan also thinks that parents with low expectations could be sending their kids that message, either subtly or explicitly. For example, if your tween hears you say "Drinking is something all teenagers do eventually," when he finds himself in a situation where he's being pressured, he may be more likely to give in because he wants to be like everyone else.

Don't blame it all on hormones

It's true that older tweens and teens are hormonal -- and that their brains won't develop the ability to control impulsive behavior until they're in their early 20s. But Buchanan says attributing all irritating behavior to hormones may be a cop-out -- the effects are small for most kids, and there are often more important causes.

When one of her teens gets grumpy, Buchanan tries to see it as a reaction to something else (academic stress, say, or a problem with pals) and asks if anything's going on. "You need to say to yourself, there must be a reason for this behavior, and I need to take the time to ask," she notes.

Of course, we all have our bad days when we snap back when barked at. But you can get back on track. Ask your tween: "You don't seem like yourself today. Is something going on?" Maybe your tween will respond with "Nothing," but at least you've shown her you care enough to listen.

Find the right balance

You've heard the drill since your tween was a tot: Kids need reasonable limits -- and if they break the rules, there should be consequences. Discipline becomes even more important as kids get older.

Teens who behave badly tend to have parents who are either too permissive or too strict. Slacker parents give their teens a long leash, which just gives them too many opportunities to get into trouble. And overly strict parents clamp down too hard, so kids rebel.

Need evidence? A recent study on drinking published in the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs found that parenting style affected how much a kid drank. The kids whose parents were permissive were three times as likely to drink heavily; those whose parents were too strict had double the risk.

Those with the lowest risk? Teens who enjoyed a warm relationship with their parents but were held accountable for their actions. Other studies have found the same is true for sexual activity -- the more involved and supportive you are and the more you set limits, the less likely your child is to have sex at a young age.

For instance, once Anna hit sixth grade and was allowed to walk home after school by herself, I realized I had to start setting rules -- otherwise, she'd go off to a friend's house without permission.

So now she has to let me know where she's going; if she goes elsewhere, she has to text first to check in. So far, so good, and her reward has been more freedom to go places alone with her BFFs, like the movies.

And that's how it should be, says Buchanan: "Rule setting is never black-and-white: You have to give your child the freedom she deserves based on past behavior." And if your kid breaks that trust, set stricter rules.

Stay connected

Yes, it's hard to drag your tween away from the demands on her time (friends, homework, perfecting her hair), but that's why you need to schedule get-togethers. While family dinners are great, if you only have time to eat together a couple of nights a week, that's good enough, says Dr. Ginsburg.

Then find other ways to check in: take a walk together, grab a Starbucks, go outside and shoot hoops. "I find that Taylor is more willing to talk when we don't have eye contact," says Leah Beckman of Boston, about her 10-year-old. "So when we're in the car, or walking to school, or sitting at the restaurant counter, he's more willing to share information."

What if your tween doesn't want to talk when you do? Try to be available when she is -- for example, knock on her door if you see the light on late at night, says Dr. Ginsburg. And let her know you'll listen without lecturing. "You want to be a good sounding board -- not solve her problems," he adds.

Help them handle stress

From worrying about tests and team tryouts to stressing about oil spills, kids are under a lot of pressure these days. "The things we worry about as parents -- the sex, drugs, drinking, and violence -- are often reactions to stress," says Dr. Ginsburg. "So you want to raise your child to have a wide repertoire of healthy coping skills."

One way to do that: Model them. If you drink and smoke when you're stressed, your child will think that's acceptable and copy your behavior as he gets older. Kids who have sex too early also tend to come from homes where the parents drink and smoke, according to the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.

Keep them busy (Just not too busy)

Another stress buster: getting kids involved in an after-school activity they love, whether it's an art class or a spot on the soccer team. Studies show that kids who are involved in extracurricular activities are less likely to use drugs; and there's evidence that kids who do sports are less likely to smoke or drink -- and, in the case of girls, less likely to get pregnant.

"Any extracurricular activity usually has a caring adult to supervise, but sports also has the team aspect--kids who can act as good role models for one another," says Megan Bartlett, director of research for Up 2 Us, a nonprofit that encourages kids' participation in sports.

Plus, belonging to a team (or any activity, for that matter) can help boost a kid's self-confidence as he masters a new skill.

Natalie Mines of East Hills, New York, also credits sports for getting her oldest son, Alex, 13, in healthier shape. "I've read that it's the kids who have tons of free time who tend to get into trouble," she says.

Alex, who did track, cross-country, volleyball, and baseball last year, started eating better and staying away from junk food and fast food "with no prodding from me," says Mines, a mom of two boys.

Keep tabs on their friends

We often worry about the ways our kids' classmates can lead them astray, but friends can be a force for good, too -- getting one another involved in volunteering, say, or becoming better students.

"Encouraging and discouraging friendships can be tricky," says Megan Lotz of Boise, ID, a mom of three. "When Elizabeth, my oldest, wants to have a sleepover, we suggest one with a friend of hers we like, and we try to make it easier by offering to drive the girl over or take everyone out for pizza."

Lotz doesn't actively discourage friendships with the pals she doesn't approve of ("that just causes angst and resentment"), but she may put some rules on the relationship -- like telling Elizabeth she can see her buddy at home but can't go over to that friend's house.

Social media is another way to keep track. Lotz is Elizabeth's Facebook friend: "I promised never to embarrass her, but it does help me gain insight into my daughter's friends and classmates."

So there is some good news: "Teens don't suddenly turn into aliens at thirteen, despite the hormones and stresses of growing up," says Buchanan. That doesn't mean your child won't make a bad decision. But it does mean he'll be more likely to tell you when he's feeling pressured.

Your kid's been caught shoplifting, smoking, or cheating on a test. Now what? Buchanan's advice:

Lay down the law. Tell your tween why you disapprove, what the dangers are ("Smoking harms your lungs, so you'll get winded when you play soccer"), and why you don't want this to happen again.

Place the penalty. Come up with a reasonable consequence, such as taking away an enjoyable privilege (she can't go shopping with her buddies next weekend), but not so severe that you can't follow through.

Monitor her behavior. Stay rigorous about keeping track of her whereabouts and asking questions. Tell her: "As long as you have my trust, I'll give you more privileges. If you break it, I'll clamp down."

Praise honesty. If your child fesses up about a bad thing she did, hold off on the consequence for now and help her figure out ways to avoid the situation in the future.

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