

## Office of Adolescent Health

# Talking With Teens About Positive Values: How You Make a Difference

- **Nurture a warm relationship.** Teens tend to be more willing to accept and make parental values their own when they feel close to their parents. And close families usually have many shared interests and values that reinforce each other. Thus, keeping a strong relationship lies at the foundation of nurturing positive values in your teen.
- **Show and tell what matters.** A key to your influence on teens' values is that they understand what really matters to you. The best way to make sure teens understand what really matters to you is to both show and tell—help them see the values in action in your own life, then talk about why you do what you do. Getting their attention, being clear, and regularly reinforcing the values all help teens understand the values you hope for them—increasing the likelihood that they will make those values their own.
- **Promote open communication.** Teens are more likely to take on their parents' values when they have open, frequent, and honest communication with each other—when teens feel comfortable talking with their parents about tough issues and about things that matter to them. Open communication increases the odds that teens will listen to and embrace their parents' values. In addition, parents gain a greater understanding of how their teens think and what's important to them. That makes it easier to connect the parents' values with the teens' own emerging values.
- **Pay attention to their world and interests.** When you show interest in the things that matter to adolescents, you show them that you care about their choices and activities. That attentiveness, in turn, motivates your teen to pay attention to and accept your values and expectations.
- **Give your teen choices and appropriate independence.** Believing that they have power in their own lives and can influence others can help adolescents develop their own values. If parents don't give choices or don't see their teens as unique individuals, young people may end up pushing away in order to develop their own sense of who they are.
- **Provide information, guidelines, and structures.** In addition to giving teens opportunities to make their own choices, it is just as important to set clear and fair expectations and consequences then follow through with the consequences when needed.
- **Learn from your teen.** Your relationship with your teen is a two-way street. You learn from each other. Through their experiences, they may develop values and beliefs that enrich your life and help you see the world and other people in new ways. Be open to what they have to teach you. In the process, they will be open to what you have to teach them.

- **Make sure your values are in sync with the other parent (when applicable).** Shared values between parents increase the likelihood that their teens will accept their value priorities. If values are not shared, teens may feel conflicting loyalties in picking which values to adopt as their own.
- **Cultivate skills to put values into practice.** In order to develop values, teens need skills to help them be confident in standing up for what they believe and to take actions based on their values. Building assertiveness and the ability to resist peer pressure, the ability to understand what it feels like to be in somebody else's shoes, and the skills of caring and compassion all help to reinforce positive values.
- **Provide experiences that reinforce positive values and commitments.** If caring for others is important, give young people opportunities to care for others. If being honest is important, give them opportunities to be honest. If being generous is important, give them opportunities to share. If being responsible is important, give them responsibilities where others are depending on them. When you do, be sure to talk about or reflect on the experience, so they become more articulate about why they do what they do.
- **View mistakes as teachable moments.** Teens are going to make mistakes sometimes and not live up to your values or their own values. Sometimes these mistakes are fairly trivial; sometimes they have big consequences. In each case, remember to keep your relationship with your teen as a priority, and find ways for both of you to learn from your mistakes. Think together through appropriate consequences as well as other ways to deal with the issue in the future. That may take time, but it can pay off in the long run.
- **Recognize the limits.** Even though you can and do influence your teens' values, you don't control them. For better or worse, many factors also influence the values teens develop. That can include media, friends, teachers, coaches, and celebrities. It can also include world events that "print" values and priorities into young people's consciousness. So your children won't necessarily see the values you share as being as important as you see them. Indeed, they may choose to reject some values that are really important to you. That doesn't mean you have failed; it means they are becoming their own persons.

Check out [Talk with Your Teen](#).

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