

Teach Your Teens to Make Good Decisions

(Stamford Times 2005)

Ghost Written for client by Ronnie Ann Ryan

High school is an important time for teenagers as they transition to young adults. Stress can build in a number of areas; from academics and sports to preparing for college, never mind the social pressures of being a teen. And all of these concerns occur at a time when the child is growing up, when age-appropriate development includes moving towards greater autonomy.

Parents react in very different ways to these tremendous changes. Some worry about socialization – will their son or daughter have enough friends or make good decisions to keep them safe from substance abuse or getting into trouble? Others are concerned about what it takes to get into “the right” college and hope for scholarships. Still others worry about possible outside influences like terrorism or crime. These real life fears can cause some parents to keep a very tight rein on young adults. But is this really the best solution?

Part of growing up involves learning to make good choices. That’s where the over vigilant parent can impede their child’s development inadvertently, by not nurturing a sense of responsibility and self confidence in the young adult’s own decision making abilities. This cautiousness may instill a fear of decision making, leaving little room for mistakes which are the true building blocks of learning. Lastly, imposing too much authority can, at times, lead to rebellion.

Naturally, there is great value in parental involvement and this is greatly encouraged during grade school years. The question becomes how much involvement and what kind? For example, children whose parents provide too much homework input may not learn to take responsibility for themselves and could be at a disadvantage when they have to function on their own later in life.

More beneficial parental help could take the form of communicating with educators and teaching children to advocate for themselves. Then teacher and student can form a relationship where the student is held accountable for his/her own work.

Parents are advised to take time — not only talk to their children, but to also really listen to them. Offer them the opportunity to help you understand their views and try out a few different ways of making decisions that will create good habits for the long run. Think back to your own youth and how you handled things. Chances are you might have made a few errors but overall, things turned out well. Most decisions from this period aren’t irrevocable and many times steps can be taken to correct instances where a child may get “off track.”

Sometimes adults simply lose sight of the fact that most activities in our daily lives are safe and even joyful. While the media highlights tragedies, the fact is that many of us have much to be happy about and thankful for.

It's worthwhile for parents to take the time to examine their own views and motivations regarding their hopes for their kids. It can be a struggle not to demand what you want versus what is more appropriate for them. Another good tip is to maintain a sense of humor and keep things in perspective. Sometimes what seems like a big blunder will have little future consequence and actually offer comic relief after everything is over.

Couples need not agree on how to address every situation. However, if there are ongoing disagreements and arguments about a child, the parents could probably benefit from learning better ways to handle their own differences. Counseling can provide tools and solutions that will help reduce the couple's tension which may be adding to an already charged home environment, effecting siblings as well. Naturally, a calmer household is more supportive for everyone involved.

One of the best ways for children to learn is from parental role models. Your kids watch how you make decisions, manage commitments and conflict and handle different circumstances that arise. As you demonstrate how to deal with life's situations, both big and small, your sons and daughters will gain important skills, helping them become the well-adjusted young adults you hope for.