

3. Break the no-talk rule before it breaks your family.

1. Our kids are confronted with a value system totally foreign to that of their parents.

In one generation our society has gone from having one, universally agreed set of values to a society where there is a plethora of views and the only universal principle is that of freedom of opinion. This is particularly so in those areas that present the greatest potential harm to our kids: sex and alcohol and other drugs. As a writer in Rolling Stone magazine said "Today's kids don't know what rules are valid anymore; everything is a shade of grey, and all that matters is green".



Added to this, the age of personal, electronically delivered entertainment means that today's kids are exposed to powerfully manipulative images and ideas for hours every day. While the images do not represent the norm, even in this society, they are so cleverly crafted and presented in such emphatic ways that they give the impression they are norm. Our kids are being challenged on a daily basis to accept values that are not only contradictory to those of their parents but are actually unsustainable for successful and safe lives.

In this environment it is essential for parents to be open and able to discuss the issues of values, faith and the future with their children. At the very least this will give our children information and measures by which they can properly evaluate the ideas that are potentially so destructive.

2. Three levels of information:

a. The biological level

Children are well informed today and nothing undermines a parent's authority more than expressing an opinion that the teen knows is factually wrong. It is important for parents to get the facts right and then to be prepared to discuss them with their children.

Most Australian children first encounter biological information about sex, alcohol and other drugs (what goes where and when, and what happens when

it does) in the last couple of years of primary school. This is a perfect time for parents to display their openness to discuss their issues and to demonstrate their knowledge on the subject. The children are at an age when they will more readily hear their parents' opinions (between 11 and 16 the 'eeeyew!' phenomenon dominates). They will feel their parents are acknowledging their growing maturity because they are being invited to discuss things of the adult world.

b. The moral level

Attitudes that keep kids safe from physical and emotional harm come not only from knowledge of physical danger but also from external guiding principles. It has been a principle of every civilisation that behaviour is to be guided by a commonly accepted code, and for good reason. The human tendency is to act on the basis of what seems good for me, now. The external standards take into consideration the implications of those actions for the individual's future and their community.

Adolescence is a time of determining one's values and what most kids will do is to use the values of their families as a starting point and set themselves at a consistent distance from them. Over time the gap between the values held by the parents and the new values of the child will shrink, until the child has its own teenagers and then the child sounds just like its parents!

The important factor in this process is that the parents clearly communicate not only what they believe, but the reasons behind it. It is not enough to say 'Because I said so' or 'It has always been like this'. Parents do not all need to become philosophers but they need to know enough about the source and benefits of their value system to be able to share that with their children.

c. The relational level

In the end, though, the only positive values that are likely to be taken on board are those that work. Interestingly, negative values (prejudice, hate and the various 'isms') that are inherently selfish are easily perpetuated by a rule of fear. Positive values like honour, integrity, and self control that are inherently selfless are only perpetuated by consistent modelling. Children will not become like their parents because what they believe is true or right, but because they like their parents.

When the deeply personal moral issues do become the topic of conversation parents should be prepared to have their views challenged, and to be dragged into some embarrassing conversations, but should always keep in mind that while a child will always argue their parent's words that child can never argue the message of their parent's life. What has worked for the parent is what the child is most likely going to use as the measure for his or her life.

3. We need to discuss not lecture

By the time a child is in its teens it will not take kindly to lectures, or gain much from them. Depending on the style of family the child might listen silently or argue aggressively but lecturing is not the way to introduce your opinions to your teen's life.

The very best way to encourage openness in a teenager to values and issues of morality is to engage with the teen in discussion about these issues. This is even better if the discussion can naturally arise in the course of every day life. For instance when the media brings controversial issues into the home, in either entertainment or news, it is far better for a parent to invite a teen's opinion than to express an authoritative opinion that shuts down any further discussion.

4. Do not compromise your morality

Teen rejection of parental values can often be so extreme that parents become fearful that by persisting with their values they will lose their children. Consequently parents bend their morality to match that which is current and in so doing can hurt their children. There is never a time in life when it is more important to know what you believe and why you believe it than when you are the parent of a teenager.

Teenagers don't need parents to accept their morality; they just need their parents to not reject them. It is both possible and worthwhile to say to teenagers "I don't like what you are doing but I will never stop liking you". The value system of their parents is the touchstone for most teenagers' lives and they will frequently refer to it and ultimately adopt (most of) it – as long as it is clear enough to see.

5. Let your kids know there are no taboo subjects

The hardest part about all of this? Teenagers set out to shock their parents. No matter how the controversial subject is raised, when forced to provide an opinion the teen will test its parents out at the margins. Without even knowing why, kids seek a reaction and if the reaction is bad or over the top the teen will almost certainly reject it and quite possibly avoid becoming involved in similar discussions in the future. Over-reactions are the quickest way to shut down any further discussion.

Do not think that because a teenager has expressed an opinion that he or she is describing a current or even planned behaviour. When confronted with the behaviour your child is very likely to be much more influenced by your views than you think.

For further reflection and action ...

1. Below are common responses to the question, "Why don't you talk to your teenager about sex?" How would you respond?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> We already had a talk. | <input type="checkbox"/> I'm leaving it up to my husband. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I gave my child a book to read. | <input type="checkbox"/> I wouldn't know what to say. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I thought the school was doing it. | <input type="checkbox"/> I thought my child was too young. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> If I talk to my kid about sex, he'll want to try it. | <input type="checkbox"/> Kids today know everything anyway. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm embarrassed to talk about it. | <input type="checkbox"/> I have been meaning to say something. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm leaving it up to my wife. | <input type="checkbox"/> The subject is taboo in our family. |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> I talk openly to my teenager about sex. |

2. Choose one of the following topics to discuss with your teenager...and then get together and talk as soon as possible

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Love and marriage | <input type="checkbox"/> STD's |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Materialism | <input type="checkbox"/> Abortion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drug abuse | <input type="checkbox"/> Masturbation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Faith in God | <input type="checkbox"/> The future |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Homosexuality | <input type="checkbox"/> Pornography |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Temptation | <input type="checkbox"/> Virginity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drinking alcohol | <input type="checkbox"/> Puberty |

3. Read "But I Talked to My Kid, Didn't I?" below.

Do you find it difficult to talk to your adolescent about sex? Does your teenager shy away from asking you questions about sexual matters? You're not alone -- as many young people would have difficulty asking their parents about sexuality as there are parents who feel uncomfortable speaking with their adolescents about it.

You can help your teenagers understand and feel good about their sexuality by becoming a talkable and approachable parent. Talkable in the sense you feel comfortable openly conversing with your son or daughter about sex, and approachable because your children feel they can initiate a discussion or ask questions about sex in a non-threatening, comfortable climate. Use the following suggestions to help you in your communication with your adolescent.

Keep in mind that teens will often test you out by expressing an opinion that is significantly advanced from the one they actually hold. Parents will usually react to where they believe a teen's opinion will lead rather than the opinion itself. Be careful not to over-react.