



Child Builders

Houston's Advocates for Mental Health in Children

Encouraging Healthy Independence in Teens

By Lori Melancon

From the moment that children are born, they begin to assert their independence from their parents. Successful parenting empowers children so that they grow into competent, responsible and successful people. Parenting is ultimately about allowing children to go out into the world on their own. Therefore, it is important for parents to instill healthy decision-making and conflict resolution techniques in their adolescents and teens both before and during this challenging time in their lives. By modeling these behaviors in their homes, parents can feel confident that their children will learn to make healthy decisions and resolve conflicts in a positive, peaceful way.

For the majority of parents, this independence and choice making seem to be most challenging during their child's teen years. Here are some ideas that may help.

Practice good listening skills. Be an active listener. Pay attention to what your teen is saying as opposed to what you think he or she will say. Don't begin to formulate your response until you have heard everything your child has to say. After they finish speaking, reflect their feelings with words like, "I hear that you are really angry with me" or "I can tell that this is very important to you." Asking questions also lets them know you're listening. "So, are you saying you would rather work this summer than go to camp?" All children, especially teens, need to feel valued and accepted by others, especially their parents. When you actively listen to children and reflect their feelings, you communicate to them that they are understood and appreciated, while also opening them up to further discussion.

Replace "You" messages with "I" messages. Instead of "You are the reason that we are late" or "You're wrong," try saying, "I feel irritated when we are late. Please set your alarm clock thirty minutes earlier next time" or "I disagree with that." Using "I messages" clearly communicates how you feel and how you would like the other person's behavior to change. While these types of messages take longer to formulate and verbalize, they are less threatening and leave the other person's dignity intact.

Use a five-step decision-making strategy with your family. You can model this process for your children and teach them the steps as early as age nine or ten. Teens, whether they admit it or not, rely heavily on their parents' actions and values when making difficult choices in their lives. By incorporating decision-making strategies into the daily life of your family and including your children in that process, you provide them with the necessary skills they need in every aspect of their lives.

1. **Gather information.** Make sure that everyone involved in the decision making process is clear about the origin and nature of the problem.
2. **View the situation from all perspectives.** Ask "What if" questions and explore the possibilities of each choice.
3. **Weigh the consequences.** Decide which consequences are possible and which outcomes are not acceptable.
4. **List the pro's and con's.** Make a chart of the positives and negatives of each choice.
5. **Make a choice and stick to it.** Follow through with whatever decision that you make together. Allow for the consequences, whether anticipated or not, and evaluate the outcome of the decision.

Allow mistakes. Parents cannot make decisions for their teens, nor can they control the outcomes of those choices. By giving teens increased responsibilities and empowering them with the tools they need to make good decisions, parents are preparing their children for true independence. Be a part of the decision-making process, prompt it with “What if” questions and explore the consequences of a variety of choices. Be prepared for whatever choice your teen makes, and be willing to allow him or her to experience the consequences of that decision.

The ultimate goal in parenting is to influence and empower children. By giving children decision-making tools, parents prepare them for the challenges they will face as teens and adults.

ChildBuilders (formerly known as HAMIC), founded in 1974, is a non-profit organization that provides innovative programs to educate parents, children, teachers and the community about the emotional well-being of children and their families. www.childbuilders.org ChildBuilders Community Education.

For further information & referral
call your child’s school counselor

DePelchin Children’s Center	713-730-2335
ESCAPE Family Resource Center	713-942-9500
Harris County Psychiatric Center	713-741-5000
Jewish Family Service	713-667-9336
Mental Health Association	713-522-5161
MHMRA of Harris County	713-970-7070
NAMI Metro Houston	281-579-3750
United Way of Texas Gulf Coast	211 or 713-957-4357

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