

## Teens Need Guidance from Caring Adults

If there is a teen in your life you no doubt have thought about the “lurking” potential risks –of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; dangerous driving, sexual activity, and the every day pressures of school, fitting in and life in general. Teens are facing a host of changes and challenges; they like to act as if they can handle things by themselves. However, even as they are growing more independent, they need (and actually want) help and guidance.

A common thread among teens who do well academically and socially, stay healthy and drug-free is that they have close, open relationships and communication with their parents and other adults. Last month in the Mayor’s Task Force Guest Column, Dr. Kris Matson shared resources that stress the “importance of positive relationships with caring adults who are (passionately) committed to the child’s very existence-first and foremost in their family and also the surrounding community”.

In addition to comfortable, open communication, it is important that teens have rules and expectations to guide them. Colleen Gengler Family Relations Educator, University of Minnesota Extension says, “Having clear rules and consistently enforcing them is essential. When teens know what to expect, it helps them feel more secure—even if they don’t like the rule.” Expectations need to be clear so there is no confusion. There may be rules about curfew, driving, Internet and other media use. Involve your teen in discussing the rules and limits. There are some rules that have flexibility and change as the teen matures. Others are set and non-negotiable. Never permitted are the use of tobacco, alcohol, and other illicit drugs. This includes the mis-use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs. Teens need to hear facts about the dangers of alcohol and other drug use and the possible consequences (both personal and legal).

Teens need to know they are loved and cared about. Peer interaction is important, but they also need involvement with family and adults. Parenting experts emphasize that teens sometimes need time at home; it’s ok for a parent to say, “We need you home tonight”. Having regular family time and meals together is a positive protective factor. In busy lives, this can be a challenge, but it is important that teens have time to express themselves, listen, and be listened to.

In spite of the best intentions, teens sometimes “mess up”. They need understanding when they are having a hard time and know they are loved no matter what even as they may be suffering consequences of poor decisions. Parents and other adults make mistakes too; when that happens, admit it and talk about how to do better next time.

Teens need safe places to go where they are accepted and can talk openly to a trusted caring adult. This may not always be their home. It could be a favorite teacher or counselor; church pastor-youth pastor; adults in youth organizations, neighbors, relatives.

As role models for our teens, adults need to provide meaningful guidance in a caring way.

*This article was written by Joan Janusz a member of the Northfield Mayor’s Task Force on Youth Alcohol and Drug Use.*