

SO, WHAT DO TEENS TALK ABOUT?

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

Do you ever wonder what teens talk about these days? In fact, do you wonder if teens physically talk at all these days! These are two serious questions, but I will address only the first today. I consider that teen talk has almost always focused on developing and securing a ‘successful persona’. So, what does a successful persona look like? Society tells us that ‘success’ is to be either well off financially, physically or academically gifted and/or good looking. Common sense would tell you that probably 75% of the population does not immediately fit into any of those categories, so what is a teen to do? They talk themselves into it. The other 25% are talking to ensure they retain the successful image.

I am thinking back to what I talked about when I was a teen. My greatest concern as a 14 year old was about relationships and being accepted. I had to look good, sound cool and somehow try to be successful at something in my life so I would impress others. As a teen I was trying to impress two groups – boys and friends in general, but boys in particular.

Teen years are often torturous, at least mine were. Yet, my life was much less complicated than teens experience today. We were not faced with the same decisions and we were not exposed to the onslaught of media that kids are so easily influenced by today.

With such huge societal changes, what do teens talk about now? They talk about the stuff they have to deal with, and not just building successful relationships that seemed to consume me. I am not saying other issues were not there, but they were not so prevalent, or commonplace. As they were not publicly addressed issues we tended not to talk about them. For example, the term ‘assault’ refers to any violent act against another person. It didn’t seem that long ago we talked about the ‘domestic’ next door and turned a blind eye to it. Sexual abuse has gone on through the ages, but because it was not publicly acknowledged as a criminal offense, children usually remained silent. Neither of these reactions were acceptable.

Issues such as sexual abuse, bullying, personal safety, drugs and alcohol, teen sex, pregnancy and suicide are real concerns in today’s society, and kids call into the ‘help’ lines to talk about it. Where is the parental guidance required to keep children forewarned and forearmed? So many parents ignore these needs in their children.

The answer is to LISTEN to what our kids are talking about and TALK to them in preparation for the kinds of issues they will likely face as they become independent and start making their own decisions. We already know what the issues are because we see them on the news every day. We don’t want to scare our kids, but we do need to tell them about what to expect. We need to remind them of the values we have instilled in them and why those values will protect

them through life. We also need to carefully monitor their moods, their activities, the movies they like to watch, the propensity for violence in our community, their friendships, their attitudes and any change in behavior. There could be no worse example than the mass shootings reported in schools and other public arenas in the last few years. How did these teens escape notice? How did they become so disenchanted, so disturbed, so disrespectful of themselves and those they eventually hurt or killed?

Now, more than ever, we need to encourage our kids to talk to us about what concerns them. This is better achieved by communication at mealtimes around the table with the TV off and no phones or computers in the area. We need to praise them for what they are doing right and coach them to make the right decisions. We need to discourage their constant texting and media communication and help them rediscover personal relationships with you and their friends. We need to tell them, as well as show them, that success does not merely mean looking good, having money, or being the top academic or athlete. Success and maturity is the result of constant encouragement by parents, our involvement in their lives, talking about teen, societal and world issues and being there when our kids fail. They don't want a judge and jury. They want our time, love, support and care.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.