

WHEN ‘NO’ IS NOT ENOUGH

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Teen years have always been hard going for both teens and parents alike. Parents try their best to prepare their kids for the many decisions they are faced with each and every day, but they regularly find that their authority and values begin to become undermined by their kids' peers and the media.

It would be safe to say that teens become more strongly influenced by what they think their friends think of them, than by the expectations of their parents. Their decisions tend to be based on sustaining friendships with their peers and sometimes these may contravene parental rules or guidelines.

Sixteen-year-old Travis asks his father if he can go for a drive with his friends on Saturday night. Dad says, “No”. Travis asks why? (There is the challenge). Dad says, “Because it is dangerous”. (Not a good answer. Travis thinks, “I wonder what Dad means by ‘dangerous’?”) Travis states, “John’s parents are letting him go.” Dad replies, “I don’t care, you’re not going!”

This kind of scenario is repeated many times over, and if the truth were known, we have done the same thing at times with our children. The result is a belligerent child and a frustrated parent. Let’s back up a few years and create some preparation for situations like this.

Point # 1. Kids need to know why they can’t do something. A toddler learns not to touch the stove because a parent says, “No, don’t touch! The stove is hot!” But somehow in the busyness of life and kids’ frequent challenges of, “But, why?” we tend to lose patience and miss a great teaching moment. My stock answer to their, “Why can’t I?” demands was to say, “Because I am a mean mother, now don’t ask me again.” I wasted teaching moments. If I had stopped to give them a genuine answer in the first place they may well have understood the reason behind my decision and been able to have applied such reasoning to similar circumstances later.

Point # 2. The best time to teach kids how to make wise decisions is when you are explaining your expectations. “This is what I want you to do, and this is why.” For example, “In this family we always tell the truth. Telling the truth means to say exactly what happened, and to not cover anything up. When you tell the truth, you feel good and you have met our family expectations. Not telling the truth is telling a lie. When you tell a lie, you feel bad, you are in trouble and people won’t trust your word. Can you see why telling the truth is the right thing to do?”

In Travis’s case, his father should have explained to him why it is unsafe for teens to go joyriding in a car. For example, there is a temptation to show off

with excessive speed, and to perform showoff maneuvers. Teenagers are known to take risks, to pay attention to passengers rather than the road, to use a cell phone while driving or to drive after illegally consuming alcohol. Whether your child is driving or just a passenger, occupants can get hurt or killed.

The very best action you can take is to talk to kids when they are still preteens and prepare them for the kinds of activities that can get kids into trouble. This is a chance for you to ask the ‘Why?’ questions. “What would you do if your friend asked you to smoke or try drugs?” “Why is that dangerous to your body?” “What would you do if someone wanted to have sex with you?” “Why is that wrong?” “What would you do if your friend wanted you to help him steal from a store?” “Why is that wrong?” “Why is it important to hang out with friends of good character, those who have the same expectations that we have taught you?”

Point # 3. It is never too late to prepare our kids for the long and winding road ahead. We need to encourage them to talk to us about any worries or decisions they are facing. We need to regularly evaluate their friendships and watch for negative influences and unusual behaviors. We need to be a soft landing for their failures and their first aid post for making a good recovery. We are their parents and not their friends. They look to us sometimes to say, “No”, so that they can use that as an excuse to their friends when they don’t quite have the courage to refuse on their own.

No matter how old they are our kids should always know that they can discuss with us the ‘whys and wherefores’ of upcoming decisions. Our job is to teach them how to make informed decisions, and to help them ‘look over the bridge and consider the consequences’ prior to actually crossing it. This is true wisdom in action.

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.