

Chopper Down

Parents Get Conflicting Signals About Nurturing Teens

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

So-called “helicopter parents” have been recently criticized in the popular press for hovering over their adolescent children, hyper-involving themselves in young lives more in need of independence than nurturing. Such recriminations follow on the heels of studies suggesting that parents are not paying *enough* attention to teens, thus spawning an epidemic of destructive behavior.

So, who’s a parent to believe?

Encouragingly, new *Teens Today* research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Group suggests a middle course, pointing parents towards paying attention to the right things at the right times.

There is no question that as young people turn the corner from childhood to adolescence they have innate needs for both space and independence. Each fuels an important developmental quest for personal identity and a peer group with which to assimilate. But neither requires the emotional abandonment that often accompanies the teenage years.

In truth, teens very much want some signal that the adults in their lives notice – and appreciate – their advancing maturity. Yet in the midst of the modern-day, frenetic American pace, we either forget or simply fail to provide the meaningful, ritualistic celebrations of transition to newfound independence and responsibility to the family and community that marked transition for earlier generations.

According to *Teens Today*, almost half of high school students (42 percent) and more than one quarter of middle school students (30 percent) say Mom and Dad aren’t recognizing their important milestones.

The result? Teens whose parents pay the least attention to important adolescent transitions, such as puberty, school changes, and key birthdays, are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, including drinking, drug use, early sexual intercourse, and dangerous driving. They are also more likely to feel stressed and depressed.

It seems clear that, absent reasonable recognition of their advancement, many teens simply make up their own rites of passage, seeking alternative routes to “maturity” that frequently include destructive choices.

Alarmingly, these are choices parents often don’t know about.

Matching self-reported activities of teens with the perceptions of their parents, the new *Teens Today* research confirms earlier findings of a “reality gap” that leaves

many families frighteningly disconnected. For example, compared to what their own parents say about them, high school teens are:

- **Eight** times more likely to say they drink alcohol;
- **Four** times more likely to say they use drugs; and
- **Two** times more likely to say they have had sex.

It's time to bridge the gap.

Traditional recognitions of passage prompt the type of parent-teen dialogue proven to reduce the likelihood of underage drinking, drug use, early intimate sexual behavior, and risky driving. They also link generations through tangible acknowledgements of physical and sometimes subtle social and emotional change.

Just as important, marking important steps in adolescent lives helps teens build bridges between whom they were, whom they are, and whom they are becoming – crystallizing their search for purpose while preparing them for a less egocentric, more collectivist role in society.

Here's what parents can do.

Identify significant transitions.

Figuring out which transitions are most important to your teen is a critical first step. What “counts” for one teen (e.g., turning sixteen, getting a first job, going on a first date, receiving a driver's license) may not matter much to another.

Communicate about and celebrate important life events.

Sending the message, whether through dialogue or a special time together, that you are “dialed in” to your teen as he takes significant steps toward adulthood is an important way to say, “I love you, I care about you, and I see that you are growing up!”

Encourage teens to explore healthy growth opportunities.

Supporting your teen's involvement in structured activities embedded with real opportunities for achievement and reward will help her climb the rungs toward – and find initiation into – adulthood.

Six years of *Teens Today* research make clear the incredibly influential role that parents and other caring adults *can* play in guiding teens toward safe, healthy choices. This latest report provides even clearer examples of *how* – underscoring the payoff for paying attention.

Chopper up.

*Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions), has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. For more information about SADD, call toll-free 877-SADD-INC. The **SADD/Liberty Mutual Teens Today** research can be found at www.sadd.org and www.libertymutualinsurance.com.*

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