



PART ONE

PREPARING TO
TEACH SOCIAL
SKILLS TO
YOUR TEEN







1

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS

Maybe you're not sure if you need this book. I've designed a short quiz to help you decide if your teenager has a social skills problem and if you ought to be concerned. You can use this quiz to figure out how your teen is developing and on what areas he or she needs to work.

DOES YOUR TEEN NEED SOCIAL SKILLS COACHING?

	Yes	No
1. Has my teenager been suspended from school more than once?	___	___
2. Has my teenager ever been arrested and charged with a crime?	___	___
3. Has my teenager on more than one occasion broken something valuable, punched a hole in the wall, or hurt his/her fist or hand out of anger?	___	___
4. Has my teenager been involved in more than one physical fight in the past year?	___	___



	Yes	No
5. Does my teenager throw angry fits or temper tantrums until I give in?	___	___
6. Does my teenager lack goals for the future?	___	___
7. Does my teenager avoid planning his time?	___	___
8. Does my teenager consistently blame others for his/her problems?	___	___
9. Has my teenager been drunk more than once or been high on drugs more than once?	___	___
10. Does my teenager engage in the same self-defeating behaviors even though they keep him/her from achieving goals?	___	___
11. Does my teenager think others are out to get him/her?	___	___
12. Has my teenager ever been physically abusive toward a boyfriend or a girlfriend?	___	___
13. Does my teenager have difficulty identifying his/her emotions as anger, sadness, happiness, or fear?	___	___
14. Does my teenager have difficulty readily identifying other people's feelings?	___	___
15. Does my teenager have trouble talking about conflicts and problems?	___	___
16. Does my teenager frequently use aggressive methods to solve problems and conflicts?	___	___
17. Has my teenager failed to develop ways to talk about or work his/her way out of uncomfortable situations, like disappointment and frustration?	___	___
18. Is my teenager too passive?	___	___



	Yes	No
19. Does my teenager have a history of being bullied or victimized by peers?	___	___
20. Does my teenager bully or intimidate peers, friends, or even family members?	___	___

If you answer yes to two or less of these questions, the chances are that your teenager only sometimes lacks some of the important social skills and has, therefore, only mild social skills deficits. If you answer yes to as many as three but no more than five questions, your teen has moderate social skills problems. And if you answer yes to six or more, your teen has serious social skills difficulties.

To address social skills problems related to your teenager's difficulties in goal setting, refer to Chapter 2. If your teen needs help with identifying and changing self-defeating behaviors, read Chapter 3. For more information about helping your teen be more assertive, go to Chapter 4. To teach your teen to have more feelings toward others, read Chapter 5. To address the problem of anger in your teen, read Chapter 6. And if you wish to teach your teen to learn to solve problems in more peaceful ways, read Chapter 7.

Whatever the important social skill that causes your adolescent to have difficulties, this book can give you some direction for helping him or her improve those skills and your daily life together.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

How can you communicate effectively with your teen in order to improve social skills?

“You always listen to us,” “You don’t ever get mad and yell at



us,” “You make it fun to learn,” “You understand kids.” These are some of the things that pretty tough teenagers have said to me. They say these things despite the fact that I have rules and high expectations and set definite limits. In addition, when they transgress one of my rules or fail to live within the limits established for them, I give consequences they don’t like.

Much of what I do and what you can learn to do with your teenager revolves around the following six behaviors:

1. Showing respect
2. Taking your teen’s needs into consideration
3. Keeping your own hostile and angry feelings under control
4. Recognizing both your child’s strengths and weaknesses
5. Listening to his gripes and complaints
6. Trying (as best you can) to make it fun to learn better social skills

It is important for you to recognize that you still have a tremendous influence on your teenager. Your teen may be bigger than you or on the way there and may seem very sophisticated a lot of the time. At the same time your teen will be asking for—more likely demanding—greater freedom and autonomy from you. Yet, all adolescents still need their parents. Your teen needs a relationship with you and your continuing guidance and support. Sometimes your child may even ask for advice—although it may well be a strain for him to follow it when you give it.

SHOW RESPECT

To be in a position to teach your teen vital social skills, you need to be actively involved in your adolescent’s life and to have a sound

relationship. What goes into a sound relationship? It begins with the way you relate to your child, including showing her respect.

I believe that adults have to earn the respect of teenagers. One of the best ways of showing your child that you deserve respect is by showing plenty of respect for her.

This may be difficult at times, especially when your adolescent is acting in immature, irresponsible, or even silly ways. The important distinction is that you don't always have to respect your child's behavior, but you do have to respect the person. For some parents this may be a subtle difference. For instance, you can be upset and disappointed if your teenage son gets suspended from school for cutting class to be with his girlfriend. Yet it's disrespectful and counterproductive to dismiss his perceived need that led to his behavior. You can address the problem by recognizing that he felt a compelling need and by letting him know that he needs to address it in some way other than skipping classes.

Respecting your teen means that you take him seriously, that you treat his ideas and dreams as very important, and that you don't treat him with derision or disdain. In other words, deal with your teen just as you would treat another adult or colleague.

One of the reasons psychologists and psychotherapists often are successful in treating adolescents is because they demonstrate respect by taking what they say seriously and by listening to them. As parents, it's sometimes easy to see our adolescent children as disappointing or immature and to stop giving them respect.

I remember talking with Yvette, a 15-year-old girl who was having a great deal of conflict with her parents. One late August I was trying to find time for an appointment for her. I didn't have a good place in my schedule, so I told her I wasn't doing anything very important on Labor Day and I could see her then if it was okay with her.

"You mean you'd come in on a holiday to see a rotten person



like me?” she asked. She was struck by the fact that I would give up part of a holiday for her. This was obviously unique in her experience.

Yvette obviously did not have a positive self-concept because she viewed herself as a “rotten person.” She was, therefore, incredulous that I would think about going out of my way for her. Demonstrating this kind of respect helped put our relationship on a solid footing. In turn, she developed more respect for me. This allowed me leverage in teaching her better communication with her parents.

RESPOND TO YOUR TEEN’S NEEDS

Most of us know that responsiveness to the needs of an infant or a young child are clearly important. Yet, I believe the need for responsiveness continues into adolescence.

Responsiveness has several elements. It means that you are loving and affectionate. It means that you show positive emotions and genuine caring and concern. Another element of responsiveness is understanding and acceptance of what your teenager needs. For most teens, those needs include acceptance, limit-setting, consistent consequences, and understanding by a caring adult. Being responsive also means being in tune with your teen’s own unique needs. For example, 15-year-old Dan had been in one of my adolescent therapy groups for a short period of time. He got bored and restless easily. It was apparent that his anger was triggered when his high school teachers didn’t pay attention to his restlessness. I didn’t want this trait to lead to problems for the group or between him and me. One day I was explaining to his group that they couldn’t always control their feelings but they could learn to control their behavior. I pointed

to Dan as an example. “For instance, guys, take Dan. He’s so bored right now he can hardly see straight. I know what he’s thinking. He’s thinking, ‘When is Mr. Windell going to shut up and let us go home?’ Right, Dan?” I said, asking him for confirmation.

Dan grinned and shook his head yes. Then he said, “Is it time to go yet?”

I pointed at him and said in an excited voice, “Thank you, Dan! You’re terrific! That’s exactly the example I needed so everyone could understand this idea. You know what, guys, Dan can’t control feeling bored in here. He gets restless here just like he does in school. That’s probably because I’m so boring. But did you hear what he asked me?”

“Yeah,” replied Cindy, a 14-year-old girl in the group. “He said he was bored and is it time to go home.”

“Right,” I said. “Very good, Cindy, you were paying attention. He’s having a feeling—restlessness—and he can’t control it. He can’t help that. But what can he help? He can choose not to ask me to go home. He can have a bored feeling, but he doesn’t have to ask every five minutes if it’s time to go. Great example, Dan. You’re a big help to this group.”

Dan got the message, as did everyone else in the group. Admittedly, it wasn’t subtle, but Dan realized he didn’t have to ask so frequently if it was time to go if someone recognized that he had a high boredom factor. In groups after that session Dan raised his hand and let me know when he felt bored and restless. Instead of asking to leave, he asked if he could get up and stretch. He had learned to recognize a feeling and to make a better choice about how he would behave. I tried to be responsive to a need Dan had by recognizing it and allowing him to address it in a constructive way that did not disturb others or end his participation in the group.



KEEP YOUR ANGER UNDER CONTROL

How you handle your anger in front of your child is an important factor in building a solid relationship. That doesn't mean that you always have to be in control and that you are never allowed to show your emotions. However, losing control of your emotions can damage your relationship with your child.

The first obvious risk to losing control of your anger is that you may lose control of your words or exhibit other out-of-control behaviors. There's almost nothing that will damage your relationship more than hurtful words or comments from you.

Teenagers are often much too fragile in their identity and self-concept to tolerate a direct attack on their ego. And if the anger is loosed too often at the teen's expense, how she feels about herself and about you will suffer. How can she trust you if you can't be trusted to remain in control?

In addition, parents who give in to their anger to the extent that physical confrontations take place run the risk, first, that their teen will not want to have a relationship. The anger and resentment that teenagers feel following a slap, a spanking, or a beating by a parent make further teaching of social skills very difficult, if not impossible.

The second major risk to losing control of your anger is that your behavior belies your message that your teen needs to learn self-control and anger management. If your words say "control yourself" while your behavior very definitely says "don't control yourself," you can be sure that your child will notice the discrepancy.

A third risk in your expressing your anger too vociferously and too frequently is that your adolescent just may get used to it and tune you out. It would be a shame if your anger meant nothing to them except that you are a cranky, unpredictable person to be avoided. Then, you have lost the ability to use your anger in strategic and positive ways.

With my own children and with the teenagers in my groups, I like to have my anger mean something; that is, when I show anger, it should have greater impact on them than just that the old man blew a fuse again. If you ask my children today how many times they saw me angry when they were growing up, they would probably say I never got angry. But when pressed, they can remember a few instances when I lost it and let them know that I was really mad. The same thing happens in my groups with teenagers. I am generally calm, easygoing, and predictable. But on the rare occasions when I get truly mad at one or more people in the group, I want them to know it and for it to be unmistakable. Therefore, a couple of times a year, I will let my anger show, usually by using an angry voice or slamming my hand down on a table.

You can be sure that after coming to expect a relatively soft-spoken and rarely upset person, the kids will sit up and take notice when I get angry. These kids often come from homes where there is much violence and anger. Dealing with an angry parent is an everyday occurrence for most of them. But when I get angry, it is an event, and they listen up. After it's over and for the next couple of weeks, teens will talk about the day Mr. Windell got angry.

"You should have been here," one kid will say to another who wasn't at that session. "Mr. Windell got so mad. He said words he never said before."

The most important thing that should come out of one of these episodes when I express my anger is that the adolescents realize I have limits and won't allow them to walk all over me. If they push me too far, I'll get mad. But they can predict this and they know I won't hold a grudge. In fact, we always talk about it later. If I feel I've gone a bit too far, I always apologize, explain why I got so mad, and tell how this can be avoided in the future.

In contrast to my behavior, Joanne, a single mother of 15-year-old Kevin, more frequently loses control of her anger. While she and Kevin generally get along well and Joanne is a competent,



loving parent, sometimes she feels a lot of pressure at work just at the time Kevin pushes her limits too far. That's when she loses it. For example, Kevin once brought home a report card on which he had two failing marks after assuring her all marking period that he was studying hard and that she had no reason to be concerned.

"You lied to me and I can't trust you," she yelled at Kevin. "I can see you're nothing more than a little child who has to be treated like a baby. I'll have to check your homework each night and call your teachers once a week to see to it that you aren't lying to me. What you've done to me is disgusting, and I don't even want to look at you anymore! There's nothing I hate worse than liars!"

Kevin was flabbergasted by his mother's explosion of rage. He was also hurt by what she said. He had thought he was more mature than most 15-year-olds, so her criticism rocked his sense of who he was. He went angrily to his room and vowed to himself he would never talk to her again. When he talked about this incident with an uncle, he complained that his mother never gave him a chance to explain his side of the low grades.

When Joanne cooled down and thought about how she had handled the situation, she knew she had hurt him and damaged their relationship because she attacked him personally. She knew she had to repair the damage she did, but she didn't know if Kevin could forgive her or if they would be able to start over and talk about the real issue of the low grades in a more reasonable way.

A few days later, she found an opportunity to apologize to Kevin. "I'm sorry for going off on you about your grades. I didn't mean what I said, and I don't think you're immature or that I have to treat you like a child. I'm sorry I said those things."

While Kevin listened, he was not ready to forgive her. It took him several more days of thinking about it before he remembered that she really loved him and probably had a right to be mad about his grades. When he did reopen the discussion, he asked her to do him a favor. "Would you think about what you're going to say



before you yell at me? That way you won't get so mad and I won't feel so much hatred toward you."

Joanne readily agreed to avoid a repeat of this incident, and the two were finally able to work on a plan for Kevin to bring up his grades.

RECOGNIZE AND ENCOURAGE THEIR STRENGTHS

Perhaps even more important than recognizing and accepting your adolescent's weaknesses is recognizing and encouraging her strengths.

Teenagers, while trying to figure out who they are, need help in discovering their strengths, assets, and good points. Knowing yourself is a key in learning to like and appreciate who you are. Pointing out your teen's assets inevitably helps your child through the sometimes confusing process of developing into an adult with a strong sense of personal identity.

Too often I find parents of teens get hung up on the problems, the faults, the breaking of rules, and the irritating behaviors, fads, and manners of adolescents, and they pay far too little attention to the positives. Although constructive criticism might be useful at times, all it teaches a teenager is what he should avoid or change. Important as that is, it does not tell him what he will be good at, what he will enjoy, and what he can do better than others. Certainly, teens are likely to hear enough from many sources about what they aren't doing so well.

Focusing on your child's good traits, characteristics, and strengths will also help him begin to formulate some ideas of what he's going to do with his life.

This is the age where he needs to start thinking about where



he's going, what he's going to do for a career, and how he's going to fit into this world. If he knows what he's good at, then he has an edge in settling on a path toward success and happiness.

Fifteen-year-old Christine may be good at listening to problems and caring for others who have problems, which might mean she could be a doctor, nurse, or psychologist. Sixteen-year-old Steven causes his parents concern because he spends too much of his time on the computer. Yet, he has a gift for understanding how computers work, and I suspect he will work in some capacity with computers when he's older.

RECOGNIZE AND ACCEPT THEIR WEAKNESSES

All young people have weaknesses as well as strengths and assets. And most adolescents know what their weak points are. I find that even delinquent adolescents who are generally not known for their insight have a good sense of what their weaknesses and failings are.

How you handle those weaknesses is critical if you want to achieve a strong relationship with your teenager. If you take the position that you must point out your child's weaknesses and make frequent references to them, you are likely to damage the relationship and cause resentment.

Discussing weaknesses and self-defeating behaviors, as you will see more clearly in Chapter 3, is important in teaching teens social skills. But it does not mean that you must sit in judgment, frequently pointing out their faults and urging changes. Because adolescents are in the phase of development when they are attempting to establish who they are and to form a solid self-concept, they will not usually handle criticism very well.

Your job is to understand your child's failings and accept her weaknesses. You don't have to point them out or give lectures on

why and how they should be changed. Accepting your adolescent's weaknesses only means that you know her trouble spots and that you accept that those are *her* trouble spots, which you will help her change when she's ready. In the meantime, you can look for golden opportunities to help her get ready or to have more insight into what her weak areas are.

For example, Christine's father worried about her because she had several teenage friends who used alcohol and drugs. He wanted to lecture her about how her friends' reputation would reflect on her reputation and how they could possibly influence her to begin using drugs or alcohol. He refrained from doing this though, as he tried to understand her motivation in having those friends.

One Saturday night when Christine was at a party, she called her dad and asked him to come and help her get another girl home who was too drunk to function on her own. He drove to the party and helped Christine take her friend home. As they were themselves returning home, he commented to Christine about his appreciation of her concern for her friends.

"If I didn't help these kids," Christine said, "they wouldn't have anyone to take care of them."

Her father immediately saw the piece of the puzzle that had been missing. Christine had a collection of friends who needed someone to look after them and help them out. While he decided that there were some risks in Christine assuming this role, he saw that she wasn't as likely to emulate their behavior as she was to just be available to help them. He knew he could deal with this at another place and time. But he also knew he would have to be gentle and caring in broaching the subject of these friends.

Another parent might have criticized Christine's choice of friends or attacked her decision to go to a party where there were alcohol and drugs. To do so, though, would have been to miss the point of why she had friends "with broken wings" (as her father characterized it) and might have led to a serious breakdown in their relationship.



Accepting negative qualities does not mean liking them. It means that you understand and see what the weak areas are. You don't applaud them, you just accept them being there. If you can help your teen feel better about them or work with him to change them, you will. But you won't reject your child for having them or make his life miserable because of them. This should also be considered a part of the respect that I mentioned before.

LISTEN TO THEIR GRIPES

As a responsive parent you will listen to whatever feelings and thoughts your kid expresses. However, a special part of being a responsive parent is listening to a kid's complaints and gripes. And because this is so important, I wanted to bring it to your attention in a different way and to highlight it with examples and illustrations.

Diana Baumrind, a researcher in parenting at the University of California at Berkeley, talks about the "reciprocity" that has to exist between parent and child—the extent to which parents take into account their child's wishes and feelings. Baumrind points out that her studies find that reciprocity generates prosocial behavior and that it is a factor in obtaining a child's compliance.

What this really means is that when a parent cooperates with a child—by listening, by trying to deal with complaints, and by understanding feelings and gripes—the child's willingness to cooperate with the parent is enhanced. So when you're listening to a teenager's complaints and gripes "about the way things are done around here," you're doing more than lending an ear. You're actually enhancing his ability and willingness to cooperate with you and other adults.

I've always found in working with adolescents that when they raise an issue and I treat it seriously, even if I can't exactly change the problem they have, there's a special sense of closeness that

develops and increases between us in the future. In addition, it tends to deflate their complaint.

For instance, a frequent complaint I get in my social skills training groups is that the videos I show them to illustrate points about peer pressure, violence, or anger management aren't realistic or that they are, to use the word of one particular teen who was in one of my groups, "cheesy." Whenever a young person brings this up, I listen respectfully and then I say something like, "You know you're right and I really appreciate your thoughtfulness in bringing this to my attention. I've tried to find the best and most interesting training videos possible. But you know what, you could be a big help. Would you be willing to help me preview some videos I'm considering for my groups? I think you have a special interest in this, and your opinion would be valuable to me."

Sometimes they actually do help out. More often, they grudgingly agree but don't follow up. But even then, they know that I have taken their gripe seriously and that I am willing to listen to any problem they have. That is disarming to oppositional teens who expect adults to be unresponsive.

TAKE THE BOREDOM OUT OF TEACHING

It's one thing to try to teach lessons to teenagers. It's another thing to make the lesson so wearisome and boring that kids are turned off. *How* you try to teach a lesson is as important as *what* you're trying to teach.

This basically means that as a parent you have to be concerned about how you go about teaching a lesson. Each of us has many teachers during our lifetime. But how many of those truly make an impact on us? And of those who do, which are the ones that lead us to learn the lessons they are trying to teach us?



Most of us remember the teachers who seemed to like us—they're teachers who have the ability to make their lessons fascinating. They are able to get across lessons with interest, fascination, and student involvement. And as a parent, you should be aiming to be that kind of teacher to your child.

How do you best do that? Based on my own experience with my children and with the adolescents I try to teach, there are three essential ways to make lessons memorable:

1. Make sure you convey a deep and abiding interest in your child.
2. Make sure you teach with passion and fire.
3. Make sure that you teach what your child wants to know.

Make Sure You Convey a Deep and Abiding Interest in Your Child

Your teen has to know that you believe in and accept her, that you care about her and what happens to her, and that she is very important to you. If young people believe that you have their interest at heart, they are more likely to listen to what you have to say.

Fifteen-year-old Paula's parents are teachers. A big conflict in the family is Paula's parents' emphasis on the importance of grades. To Paula it seems that they place far more importance on the value of grades than they do on the value of learning. For this reason, almost anything they say about her grades ends up with Paula tuning them out or getting into an argument with them. She knows they love her, but she has stopped believing that they are encouraging good grades to help her. In fact, Paula believes they are working out some of their own problems, like reliving their own student experiences and pushing her toward a kind of success they never had. The value of what they could



be teaching her about hard work and sacrifice at school is, therefore, lost.

Make Sure You Teach with Passion and Fire

It's one thing to have knowledge about a subject; it's another thing to be able to teach it with a feeling of passion that comes across to students. I think teenagers are looking for adults who truly believe and practice what they preach. That kind of commitment, which they often find lacking in adults, is important. The excesses and the passions that teenagers feel have often burned out in adults. When kids see the fires burning, though, they recognize it and are willing to pay attention to it.

The last thing they need is a teacher who is lukewarm about the subject or is hypocritical. To effectively teach your child, it is important that your passion for a subject shine through—whether it's goal-setting, anger control, or abstinence from alcohol or drugs. Teenagers get turned off by a parent or an adult who is going through the motions and teaching a subject because it is “what parents are supposed to do.”

Make Sure that You Teach What Your Child Wants to Know

You have to connect somehow. Your teen has to want the information you are imparting. That means it is vital that you somehow make it practical and useful.

When your teen asks you a question or hints around about something, you have a potential hook. For example, when I'm teaching anger management methods, teens typically ask, “Why do we have to learn about deep breathing? How's this going to help us if somebody is threatening us?”



I know this question isn't asked out of idle curiosity or just to be difficult. They truly want to know. That gives me a great opportunity to answer the question and to teach a brief lesson about which anger management methods will be useful in specific situations.

USE A MULTIMEDIA LESSON IF POSSIBLE

Just talking is not always good enough. Try to make lessons more interesting and more memorable by using different teaching mechanisms.

While watching a movie with your teen, discuss the actions of the hero and of other characters and talk about how they could have handled situations differently. Discuss the morality of the characters and why they did or did not do the right thing.

If you can find videos designed to teach social skills (see suggestions in Resources at end of book), use them to help teach lessons to your teen. Engage your child in role-playing, or, as a family project, write a play or short skit.

Leave notes, quotes, or ideas on a family bulletin board or write ideas on a dry erase board. Occasionally give your teen a copy of an inspirational article, essay, or book. As much as possible, teach through different media. Not all adolescents learn in the same way, so if you can teach your child through appealing to different senses, there is a better chance he will remember the lesson you're trying to teach.

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES FOR LESSONS

Very often, in day-to-day life with your teenager, "golden opportunities" for lessons will arise. These are situations that present themselves that give you a special chance to teach a lesson. Take

advantage of these. Here's an example. One day when I was driving my children somewhere, my daughter, in middle school at the time, said, "There's a girl in my school who has a bottle of vodka in her locker."

Certainly I was concerned, and I recognized this as one of those teachable moments when she was clearly interested in what I had to say about a classmate having a bottle of vodka in her locker. I started by asking Jill a question. "What do you think about someone who is drinking vodka at school?"

"I think she's dumb," my daughter said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because she could get in big trouble," Jill replied.

"Is that the only reason you think it's dumb?" I said.

"No," Jill said. "How can she learn anything or do her work if she's drunk? She's going to flunk out of school if she keeps that up."

"Yes," I said, "I really agree with you. Drinking alcohol is a dangerous thing to do. She can't do well in school or in friendships if she's drinking. But there's something else that concerns me."

"What's that?" Jill asked.

I told her, "If she's hiding vodka in her locker and drinking during the day, that probably means she has problems she's not able to share with others. For instance, she's not talking to her parents about whatever is bothering her. That's too bad that she can't do that. I'm sure her parents would like to help her out. No matter what's bothering her, I would hope that her parents could talk to her about it and help her find a way to handle it."

"I'll bet they'd be mad if they knew she was drinking vodka," Jill said.

"Maybe," I said. "But they might be relieved if she came and talked to them and told them she was drinking and asked for their help."

"Yeah," said Jill.



That was the end of that conversation. Whether Jill can remember this conversation or others like it, I'm not sure. What I do know is that it is now more than fifteen years since this discussion took place and she has never had a drinking problem. I certainly can't take all the credit for this, but I'd like to think that how golden opportunities like this were handled have played a part in some of her life decisions.

Jill's initial statement about a girl at school presented one of those situations that doesn't come along often enough with our children, but when they do, you want to take advantage of them. That's what makes it a golden opportunity. It's like someone suggesting you buy an unknown stock called Microsoft in 1981. Take advantage of a golden opportunity, and you'll profit from it for a long time. Fail to use it, and you'll kick yourself afterward.

Always be on the lookout for those golden opportunities. You can usually recognize them because your teen will be asking a question. Golden opportunity questions may sound like this:

"What's so bad about smoking marijuana?"

"Why do I have to go to college?"

"What difference does it make if I learn geometry? I'll never use it."

"What was it like when you went to high school?"

"What's the big deal about teenagers having sex?"

"Why do I have to go to church?"

"Did you ever use drugs?"

These are questions you may be tempted to answer with a flip-pant remark or with a lecture. Resist any initial temptations to give your opinion, and first find out where he or she stands on the issue and what the question means for him or her.

Then there are comments or statements that provide golden opportunities, too. They often come about like this:

“A girl at school is pregnant.”

“One of the guys on the football team says that steroids won’t hurt you.”

“The substitute teacher made some racist comments.”

“Jermaine said his father cheats on his income tax and never gets caught.”

“Hillary’s parents don’t care how late she stays out.”

“Karen’s mother gets mad so easily.”

“I got my progress report today.”

“A kid at school showed me how to get into the school’s computer system.”

Then, too, there are golden opportunity situations. These can include TV shows that have a theme that can open up conversations and discussions. Plays and movies can do the same thing. Walking in on your child who is chatting on the Internet and using obscene language is a golden opportunity. So is finding out that your teenager has ordered a pay-for-view, X-rated TV movie. Each time you are with your adolescent in public, you can probably find at least one, if not several, golden opportunities.

I remember one time when my son Jason played a cassette tape for me in the car one day. I had not heard this group before and he asked me to listen to this “cool” group he had discovered. After listening for a while, I had a golden opportunity to say something about what I believe about sexually explicit audio tapes and antiwomen messages. What I said was that I had trouble with some of the lyrics I heard: “You may think some of these lyrics are funny or clever, but think about what they say about women. Would you feel comfortable playing this tape in front of your mother or a girl you respected? If you wouldn’t, then you have to ask yourself why you are listening to this group and their lyrics.”

Another time, my daughter was with me at an outdoor jazz concert. The smell of marijuana was wafting through the air and



she asked what that strange smell was. After answering, I had an opportunity to make an editorial comment about drug use. “You might as well get used to this smell,” I said, “because you will come across it again. You’ll see kids using marijuana at school and at parties, and they’ll probably offer you some. You’ll probably be tempted to try it.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” she said.

“I know you think that now,” I said, “but most of us are tempted to try things that other people say make them feel good. I’m not in favor of people using any drugs. I would prefer that you read as much as you can about drugs and what effects they can have on you. And always be aware that no matter how much you trust the person who is urging you to try something, you don’t really know what it is you’re trying or where it came from.”

HELP THEM LEARN THEIR OWN LESSONS

Many times parents miss out on golden opportunities by using a sledge hammer to get their lesson across. They either do this by making the lesson too obvious or by constantly repeating it when the original point was made long ago.

Many parents believe that important lessons must be delivered in a stern or serious voice, must be given in a long lecture, or must have a moral. If you give lectures that are too long, too boring, too formal, or too preachy, your child will tune out and you will fail to teach when an opportunity existed.

You can teach an important social skills lesson in one sentence, one joke, or one short, pithy story. For example, a friend of mine once told me that when he was in high school, he told a teacher he liked about his desire to be a lawyer. “The world doesn’t need any more regular lawyers,” she said. “But the world is in need of good, ethical lawyers.”



My friend went on to be an attorney who served on ethics panels for lawyers. In two sentences, his teacher taught him a lesson that he never forgot.

REINFORCE LESSONS

Don't forget to use old-fashioned praise and rewards sometimes to punctuate the importance of what your teen is learning or how well he has remembered a social skill.

Just because he's a teenager doesn't mean that rewards and motivations won't still be useful. I find that even sophisticated and hard-core teenagers, kids who are blase about a lot in life, are still often thrilled by a well-placed "nice going" or a simple reward, such as a gift certificate to a favorite fast-food restaurant or a certificate I made on my computer.

Of course, rewards shouldn't be overused or viewed as a substitute for your interest and involvement. Those are still the most important things you have to offer.

