



TACKLING THE TOUGH CHOICES

helping teens navigate the perilous landscape of good decision-making

By Laura Walker

The human brain does not reach full development until the early to mid-twenties. The last part to fully mature is the frontal lobe, which controls decision-making. As with any skill, there are ways that parents can help their child develop positive decision-making skills, particularly when addressing topics such as sex, drug and alcohol use, and relationships.

Your teen's physical development and exposure to adult situations generally arrive a dozen years before their brain is ready to maturely address them.

Even at a young age, it is important for children to begin to understand how actions have consequences – both good and bad. Allowing a child to experience a bad repercussion (one that is obviously not dangerous to their wellbeing) is key to helping him understand that he should avoid risky behaviors and learn from his mistakes.

When children enter adolescence, they are faced with difficult decisions, some of which can have life-altering and long-term negative consequences. Since we can't shelter our kids forever and expect them to become well-adjusted, productive members of society, adolescence is the perfect time to begin setting expectations.



"Kids are going to have questions and they will be faced with difficult decisions. If a child is not secure in themselves and are unaware of the serious repercussions and potential consequences for something like drinking or sex, they can be more likely to give in to peer pressure," said Stephanie Moses, Outpatient Therapist for Canopy Children's Solutions. "If you get angry or dodge questions when your child brings up a sensitive topic, they will likely stop coming to you. They are going to seek out information and you want to be part of what they are learning so you can also help them understand the potential consequences, as well as your own expectations for them on the topic."

Responding angrily or accusingly if your teen broaches sensitive subjects like sex and drugs, can shut down communications at a time when they need your support and guidance the most.

Helping your child envision the "big picture" for their lives is also helpful in steering them toward positive choices. Ask what is important to them – sports, friends, grades, going to college? Showing them how certain activities or peer groups can affect or hinder them from "their success" can help to sway them from participating in risky behavior. This can also help you gain an understanding about how well your child understands the potential consequences of such activities.

Modeling positive behavior is also critical in aiding a child's decision-making process, particularly in friendships and relationships. Children begin to pick up behaviors from their parents at an early age. What example are you setting? Does your child see positive conflict resolution in your relationships? Do they see inclusion and compassion in your friendships? These lessons, while they may be somewhat influenced by peers, begin at home.

Parents need to remember their own teen years and share their experience with their child. Were there decisions you wish you made differently? Were there consequences you or maybe your peers experienced that were life altering? Share these memories with your child to show why you want them to avoid certain behaviors, but also understand, they may not always heed your advice. Make sure, regardless of the decisions your child makes, you keep the lines of communication open and remind them you are always there.

Your teen may find it difficult to believe you faced some of the same challenges as a teen. Sharing some of your own struggles and the consequences of your actions, can help them understand that you can relate to their problems and have the benefit of life experiences they can apply to their own situation.

"One of the most dangerous things that can happen is when a child finds themselves in a bad situation and is afraid to tell their parents and ask for help," said Moses. "When you begin to have these conversations with your kids, ask them what they know about drugs, alcohol and even sex and casually find out if they or any of their friends have tried these activities."

Moses reiterates if a child admits to having been involved in risky behavior, try not to overreact but instead thank them for being honest. That doesn't mean there aren't consequences, but be aware of how you react. Getting angry can quickly close down communication. Talk openly about all the



potential consequences (addiction, pregnancy, overdose, disease, injury, etc.), and ask your child how they felt about the experience. This can also be a great time to discuss an "out" or safe word. If your child finds him/herself in a situation they aren't comfortable with, they can use a safe word to discreetly let you know they need help. This allows them to save face with peers and safely gets them out of the situation.

When helping your teens set high standards for their decision-making and behavior, make sure they know that even if they stumble, you will be there for them to provide love and support.





Bad decisions are often made in the midst of stressful situations, pressure from peers (and sometimes adults) and when seeking acceptance. Moments of heightened emotion are when teens may act more impulsively or reactively to a situation. Having discussions early and encouraging your child to stop and think before speaking or acting can help them to make better decisions in general, not just about risky behavior. Understanding your child’s feelings and evaluating risk/reward is key to good decision-making and staying safe.

While we shouldn’t make all decisions for our kids, we can lay a foundation for good decision-making skills that can be built on. Be sure your child knows that even if he/she makes a bad decision that you are still in their corner and, while disappointed, will love them regardless.

Now, there’s an app for that.

Healthy Teens for a Better Mississippi is excited about the launch of the Healthy Teens Mississippi App. The goal is that every teen in the state choose pathways that will help them live balanced lives, be treated with respect and achieve good physical, emotional, and mental health. The Healthy Teens Mississippi App is a great resource for teens, parents, schools, and community health organizations. For more visit www.healthy-teensapp.com.



Laura Walker is the staff writer for Canopy Children’s Solutions. Canopy is Mississippi’s most comprehensive nonprofit provider of children’s behavioral health, educational and social service solutions. For more information about services through Canopy Children’s Solutions, visit mycanopy.org or call 800-388-6247.

Growing Up Knowing

Did you know that Mississippi has the third highest teen birth rate in the nation? Growing Up Knowing is working to turn that tide.

Founded as The Mississippi Campaign for Teen Pregnancy Prevention, **Growing Up Knowing** engages young people and their parents or caregivers in real conversations about sexual health and abuse prevention throughout the state of Mississippi. The organization provides youth and their parents or caregivers accurate information and tools they need to stay safe.

What makes Growing Up Knowing different from other health education programs is that it engages multiple generations – students, parents, caregivers, and grandparents – in every step of the educational programs. Parents are able to share their own family values and expectations. The organization believes when it works across generations, real change happens as family communication and interaction are strengthened.

Growing Up Knowing has two signature programs – Growing Up Knowing Middle School Program and My Body, My Boundaries Elementary School

Program. It partners with communities, schools and faith organizations to provide these two programs to ensure healthier life decisions. The premise of the organization is that children should “grow up knowing” the facts about sexual health, be able to effectively communicate with their parents, and learn strategies to stay safe from potential abusers.



For more information about Growing Up Knowing visit www.growingupknowing.org.