

343 05/22/2006 How to talk to our children about responsibility

I have been writing about the importance of letting our children and teens make choices and live with the consequences. How you talk to your children about this is very important.

If you want open discussions, it is important that you respect their opinions and help them explore alternatives. Here is an example of something teens often face.

Suppose that your seventeen-year-old daughter wants to go to a party. You know that the party might be unsupervised, and that alcohol may be available. You have no guarantee that she will obey if you forbid her to attend. This is not a time for ultimatums or lectures. Instead, you need to have a conversation about choices.

Say something like, "Let's talk about the advantages and disadvantages of your going to the party." Let her tell you. Guide the discussion by asking "what if..." questions. "What will you do if the party turns nasty?" "What is your plan for a graceful exit if you think you should leave?" "How will you handle the pressure to drink?" "What if law officers arrive? Could you be in trouble even if you are not drinking? What could be the consequences if you do drink?" Also, talk about the positives of going to the party. (Social acceptance is a high priority with teens.)

Finally, say, "I think you are old enough to make this decision. You know what is right, and you know the risks involved. I just want you to understand that you will be responsible for what happens as a result of your choice. There is one other thing. You know that I would prefer you not drink. However, if you do, I want you to call for a ride home...no questions ask. Knowing when you should not drive is another part of being responsible."

Now your daughter has thought about possible consequences if she chooses to go to the party. She knows that she is responsible for her actions. You are not angry at each other; therefore, she is free to call if she needs a ride home. She is well prepared to make her decision.

Next week, I will write about the discussion the morning after the party.