



PARENTING WITH POSITIVITY

ADOLESCENT HARM REDUCTION

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Risk-seeking behaviours are a normal part of adolescence. It's a result of the natural drive to seek independence and autonomy partnered with a still-immature prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that helps humans think through the implications of decisions and make deliberate choices). While it may be normal for adolescents to take risks, those risks don't have to have severe consequences and approaching parenting from a perspective of reducing harm may be helpful.

THE SIX PRINCIPLES OF HARM REDUCTION

Harm reduction is an evidence-based approach, typically used in healthcare settings, to help reduce the likelihood and severity of injury when it comes to risky behaviours. Harm reduction interventions, although most often used for targeting addiction and substance related harms, has been expanded into other public health concerns, such as texting and driving, and can be used as a practical and non-judgemental framework for parents to have conversations with their teenagers about substance use and abuse, sexual activity, drinking and driving, poor health habits, suicidality, and other high risk activities. It is broken down into six practical principles that focus on positivity and non-judgemental support.

Humanism ensures that we approach teens with respect and dignity in order to foster open dialogue. Adolescents take part in risky behaviours because they benefit from them in some way, and it builds trust and attachment when we acknowledge this from a non-judgemental viewpoint. If we can foster empathy for the underlying reasons for their actions, teens feel valued and validated. This is not the same as condoning the behaviour; it is simply meeting them halfway by understanding the reasons behind their actions.

Emma is 11 years old with a new cellphone and is desperate to start creating accounts on social media. Her dad is uncomfortable with her dipping her toe into the social media world right now, but wants to honour her point of view:

"Emma, I hear you telling me that all your friends are using these platforms and that you'll feel left out if you don't. I get that it's important to you to feel part of the group." (Try to resist the urge to follow this up with a "but". Let the sincere statement of empathy sit between you.)

Pragmatism is understanding that no one will ever make the "right" choices 100 percent of the time. It is about being realistic, not expecting perfection, and relating to your child that you want them to be fully aware about the health implications of [insert risky behaviour here]. It is taking an active role in providing education without forcing your morals and values onto them.

Carlos is a 15-year-old who was found drinking at a party the previous night. His mom is really worried about him consuming alcohol so young, particularly because there is a family history of alcoholism:

"Carlos, I know it's tough to turn down something that you see other people doing. I don't expect you to be perfect. I also feel worried that, given our family's struggle with alcohol, that you are at greater risk of developing a problem if you're already drinking now."

Individualism reminds us that teens are their own unique individuals and not a replication of you from when you were young. What worked for you may not work for them and they will likely go through experiences that you may not be familiar with. Each individual has their own needs and strengths and along with that comes their own choices.

Sophie is 16, and is dating for the first time. Her mom had a very strict upbringing and wasn't allowed to date until she was 18 and is very anxious about the dating risks that may see Sophie assaulted, acquiring a sexually transmitted infection, or getting pregnant. She has tried to foster a more open dialogue about sexuality, but is still worried:

"Sophie, I'm struggling with this because I was raised with such a strong message around abstinence-only, and it's hard for me to shake those values. I see what a bright, confident young woman you are, and how respectful you and _____ are with each other. We've had so many conversations about how to advocate for your own safety and pleasure and you have a much different world view and more skills than I had at your age."

Autonomy gives teens the ability to self-govern and make their own choices to the best of their abilities based on education, beliefs, and priorities, ultimately providing them with opportunities to problem solve and to think abstractly. This may feel difficult if we believe that we know what is best for our kids, but although it is a parent's role to educate and make suggestions regarding health behaviours, the final decision is up to the teen. One active approach a parent can take is asking their teen to make a list of pros and cons of a particular choice. Developing the skills of shared decision-making and reciprocal learning before your child is exposed to high risk activities helps prevent high risk behaviours and creates a strong bond between parent and child.

Sophie's mom provides her with some good quality, teen-friendly resources on healthy sexuality and asks her to write down some pros and cons of engaging in more physically intimate activities. She suggests looking at information about ways to reduce the risk of some of harmful consequences of different forms of sex, and make a ranked list of best options. She offers to review the list with her.

Incrementalism is the notion that any positive change demonstrated by your teenager should be reinforced, while acknowledging that mistakes happen. When the balls inevitably get dropped, we can express empathy, acknowledge humanity, and reflect on what happened and why.

Devon is learning to ride their bicycle. They have demonstrated confidence on the road and an ability to follow the rules appropriately and safely. Their dad has given them permission to ride their bike to school. One day, Devon's dad is home early, and observes Devon riding through a stop sign as they turn onto their street; there are no cars around:

"Devon, it's been so much fun watching you enjoy riding your bike. I saw you look for cars when you went through that stop sign, and it was clear to me that you were being careful. Can you tell me why you didn't actually stop like you were supposed to? What made you feel like that was okay?"