

Jodi Dworkin, Ph.D. Associate Professor, Department of Family Social Science and University of Minnesota Extension

I never see my teen anymore.

As your child becomes a teenager, she will start spending a lot more time with her friends and a lot less time with you. This is normal. Teens with friends are physically and emotionally healthier than those without friends. Friends may help teens solve some of the problems they will face.

I'm worried my teen's friends are a bad influence.

Teens do not drink or use drugs *only* because their friends do. Abusing alcohol or drugs is a sign of a problem more serious than peer pressure. There are ways parents can help prevent their teen from drinking alcohol or using drugs. Research has found that when parents monitor their teen's behavior, the teen is less likely to participate in problem behaviors, and more likely to choose friends who show behaviors that parents like.

What does she see in her friends?

During the teenage years friends provide care, respect, and trust. Teens choose their friends because of similar interests or to make themselves more popular. Your child's friends are going through the same kinds of things as your teen. They understand each other so they can talk about their problems and figure out ways to solve them together.

What would make him do that?

Teens make decisions based on two important questions: What do my friends think? Will it be fun? Behaviors that parents see as problems, such as staying out past curfew or trying pot once, may seem okay to your teen. Your teen's idea of fun and his perceptions of the level of risk involved determine whether or not he will participate in risky



behaviors. For example, your teen is probably well aware that getting drunk carries many risks. But to a teenager, having fun and being with friends at the coolest party on Saturday night is more important than the risks.

There is a trade-off between doing what one knows is right and being accepted by peers. Although your teen may have gotten drunk once or dyed his hair blue, keep in mind what he could be doing and what he has chosen not to do!

Should I stand back and just let him make stupid decisions?

- Teens decisions may not be irrational or stupid. Your teen might just be considering different options than you would in the same situation.
- You and your teen might identify different consequences of a behavior. For example, for you, having unprotected sex might lead to pregnancy or a disease, while your teen may feel *not* having sex might mean losing her boyfriend.
- Your teen may place a different value on potential consequences than you do. Losing the boyfriend she is desperately in love with seems like the worst thing in the world.

- Teens may view the likelihood of a particular consequence differently than you do. Teens often feel very strongly that “It won’t happen to me.”

Tips for talking with your teenager about risk taking

- Discuss what makes a reasonable risk. You and your teen may have different ideas of what is reasonable. Talk about what might happen if your teen decides to have a beer at a party.
- Ask your teen to consider, “What are the potential benefits and consequences of this behavior?” Role-play different possibilities recognizing kids’ and parents’ views. For example, you may see no benefits to teenage sex, while your daughter desperately wants her boyfriend to say he loves her.
- Keep in mind, risk taking can be a positive thing. It can give your teenager confidence in his abilities, teach him to trust his own judgment, and help him face failure and frustration.

What can I do to help my teen make better decisions?

At some point, every teenager is going to have to make decisions about alcohol, sex, and drugs. Talking with your teen lets her know how you feel about these issues and increases the likelihood that she will share your values. It is also a way to help her understand what the consequences of her actions are, and that these consequences are very real. Listen to your teen. She has questions and concerns that are different from yours. Talking lets you discuss both of your concerns and helps eliminate fighting.

Can decision making be taught?

You can teach your teenager to make good decisions on her own, by giving her the responsibility, information, and guidance to do this. The first step is recognizing how people solve problems and remembering that we all learn to solve problems by making mistakes.

Adapted from *University of Illinois Extension fact sheets* written by the author.

Here is one problem-solving process you might try:

- Identify the problem.
- Figure out the cause of the problem.
- Decide on your goal.
- Identify what resources you could use to reach your goal.
- Identify as many possible solutions as you can. List the pros and cons of each.
- Choose your best option and carry it out.
- Think about the outcome and revise your plan for the next time, if necessary.

Where you can go for more information:

Families with Teens — University of Minnesota Extension
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/families-with-teens/>

U of M Children, Youth & Family Consortium
www.cyfc.umn.edu

Kids Health
<http://www.kidshealth.org>

ParentFurther: A Search Institute Resource for Families
<http://www.parentfurther.com>

You may also want to look at:

Schaefer, C. E., & DiGeronimo, T. F. (1999) *How to talk to teens about really important things*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Steinberg, L., & Levine, A. (1997). *You and your adolescent: A parent’s guide for ages 10-20*. New York: Harper Perennial.