The teenage years - A risky time

The teenage years are a time of increased risk-taking and novelty-seeking behaviours. In fact, such increased risk-taking usually does not occur at any other point in our lives and the way that teens engage in risks has been called one of the greatest behavioural changes that occurs within adolescence.1

Unfortunately, teens also experience an increase in injury and death rates; specifically, the rate of injury deaths doubles during this stage.2 This rise in deaths has been linked to teens’ increased risk-taking behaviours such as risky driving, alcohol and drug use, violence and unsafe sexual behaviours.3 In fact, statistics on car crashes, risky sexual behaviours, binge drinking and crime show that adolescents engage in more risk behaviours than any other age group.2 3

Do as I say, not as I do?

As a parent, you have probably done your best to ensure that your teen is prepared to face the risky world that we live in. What you may not realize is how much your own behaviours influence the behaviours that your teen feels safe engaging in.

Even though it may not seem like it, your teens are watching you all the time and they mimic the risks that you take. In fact, researchers have found that parents’ risk-taking behaviours and safety practices can predict how teens will and intend to behave when they are adults.4 This means that it’s not only important for you to teach your teens how to take smart risks, you have to show them too. As a parent, you need to be sure that you are setting the best example possible for your children.
Safety is child’s play?

When you do not follow the safety behaviours you teach and expect your teens to follow, they may be learning that safety and avoiding maladaptive risk behaviours is something only children should be concerned about. Also, when you take the risks that you teach your children to avoid, you’re sending the message that safety is not as important as it really is and that adults with greater experience and skills do not need to be as safe.  

For example, if you have taught your teen that they should not text while driving, but you use your cellphone behind the wheel, even for just a moment, this sends the message that your previous teachings are not as important as they really are. You may not even think that your teen is paying attention, but they watch and learn from you more than you may think! In fact, researchers have found that teens are very attentive to the risks their parents take.

What does all of this mean?

Your behaviours may become your teens’ behaviours. When you take risks, your teen will likely take the same risks, just as when you’re taking smart risks, your teen will be more likely to do so as well. Your teen is looking to you for guidance and leadership around which safety behaviours are important to follow.

As a parent, you need to be sure that you are teaching and showing your teen how to best navigate through a world filled with risky decisions. Safety cannot be something that you just teach your child about; you need to set safe examples as well. You cannot expect your child to take the smart risks you do not take.

References