

## FATHERING TEENS: A BALANCING ACT

A recent survey of research on adolescent development by Child Trends notes that teen and their behavior frequently “cluster”: good or bad behaviors (and good or bad peers) tend to come in groups. For instance, if your teen is struggling academically, he is likely to add a group of other negative behaviors, such as smoking, taking drugs, binge drinking or risky sexual behavior; and he will likely associate with friends who struggle with those same issues. As the number of negative behaviors increases, teens will isolate themselves in groups that have similar behaviors. Clearly, this phenomenon presents enormous challenges for fathers who hope to intervene and help their teens.

The survey also lists some positive ways fathers can contribute to their teens’ lives and help them navigate the teen years without serious trauma. They can model and promote physical health through exercise and good eating habits, encourage their teens in school, attend their extracurricular activities, and help them understand the consequences of risky behaviors.

Kristin Moore, president of Child Trends, sums of the findings aptly: “These findings suggest that parents need to remain actively and positively involved in the lives of their teenagers, while also allowing teens to take on a greater independence for their conduct, as appropriate for their ages.”

The key for fathers of teens is finding a balance between being supportive and caring, while still monitoring behavior and enforcing family rules. Finding middle ground is difficult for many of us fathers. If we’re too strict and inhibit our children’s independence, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors out of rebellion. On the other hand, teens that have overly warm and permissive fathers tend to be impulsive and make many of those same mistakes.

### *To Think About...*

In the face of these challenges, we fathers would be well served to cluster, as well—to seek support from other like-minded dads and multiply our positive influence. One father named John credits another dad for helping him bridge the chasm between himself and his daughter.

When John learned that his daughter was engaging in risky sexual behaviors, he was overwhelmed with shame. First, he blamed his daughter, then himself. After several weeks, another father challenged him to forgive his daughter, look to the future and seek to rebuild the relationship. John told me, “The last thing I wanted to hear was that I should forgive her. It didn’t make sense! This was her problem! It took me a long time, but when I finally gave up and forgave her, our relationship turned a corner. My friend continues to ask about my daughter and encourage me in that relationship.”

*Action Points for Committed Fathers...*

- 1. Discuss with your teen the consequences of risky behaviors. Urge them to live responsibly as a first step in becoming more independent.**
- 2. Ask your wife or the mother of your teen how you could improve as a father in these areas: supporting our kids, monitoring their world, caring for them, and enforcing family rules. A word of caution for us fathers: You might Be prepared *Not* to hear great things (most kids, uh, adults know when the report card is going to be bad), don't sullen up, and see this as an act of love. Remember that you want your mate to be honest because this is a team effort.**
- 3. Reach out to one of your kid's friends by including them in an activity you have planned with your kid.**
- 4. Tell another father a specific challenge you're facing as a father and ask for his advice.**
- 5. Consider starting a fathering small group with some other dads you know. Gosh, men get into all kinds of spiritual groups and talk about all the "Kum by Ya" stuff and read all the "how to books" to be a better whatever and go to our men's clubs at noon or at breakfast. Why not one on how to be a good father? Whow, what a great idea!**