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Just Talking Is Not Enough

If you're the parent of a teenager, you may feel as though you have been talked to death about, well, talking. Nonprofit organizations, advocates and national nannies of all stripes plead with parents to talk to their children and teens in order to steer them away from the temptations of adolescence. Public service ads from the Office of National Drug Control Policy conclude with the tag line "Talking. The Anti-Drug." Philip Morris urges parents to address teen smoking with its catch phrase "Talk. They'll Listen." Even Anheuser-Busch is in the act, encouraging parents in an ad that appeared in newspapers nationwide to "keep talking" to their children about alcohol.

In our collective zeal to get parents around the kitchen table talking with their kids about the dangers of (fill in the blank: sex, pregnancy, drugs, alcohol, violence), I wonder if we may have inadvertently given desperately-seeking-solutions parents the wrong impression. At a time in their children's lives when parents most fear they have lost their kids to the influence of peers and popular culture, have we sold parents a bill of goods by telling them that the remedy lies in simply

talking with their sons and daughters?

Talking to your kids is absolutely essential. But it is also absolutely insufficient. Two decades of top-notch research—including the widely respected National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, funded by the federal government—clearly show that it is the overall depth and texture of relationships ("connections") between parents and kids that make all the difference. This research also shows that setting fair limits and expectations—and enforcing them—is critical.

It's the good, the bad and the ugly of parenting that really matters, not just the talking. It's telling your children not just about what's safe but also about what's right. It's setting high expectations as well as curfews. It's knowing what is going on in their lives and spending time with them engaged in activities that suit their interests. It's demonstrating love and affection clearly and often. And it means striving for a relationship with children and teens that is warm in tone, firm in discipline and rich in communication.

Doing this without alienating your children is not for the weak of heart, but it can be done. Sociologists call it authoritative (not

authoritarian) parenting, meaning that the adults believe they are in charge and act that way, with mutual trust and respect. Full disclosure here: I am not above reproach on the "talk is enough" front. As director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, I have spent a fair amount of time encouraging parent-child communication. In fact, this week we will be releasing a new publication—"Parent Power: What Parents Need to Know and Do to Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy"—that, among other things, tells parents to "talk with their children early and often about sex and be specific." Still, seeing the growing number of billboards, pamphlets and public service announcements imploring "talk" has given me pause.

All this was brought home to me recently when I asked a friend of many years standing who has raised seven children what she would do differently if she had it to do all over again. She said that although she remained a great believer in being an approachable, open mom, willing to talk about all subjects great and small, she said, "I really wish I had told my children more often what I thought was right, and then tried to make it

happen. I was so concerned about being a flexible friend that I sometimes forgot to be a parent."

Fellow parents-in-need, it's more complicated and messy than just talking. Research shows that parents must have a point of view and some spine to go with it. So by all means, talk to your kids. But do not be lulled into believing that talking alone is what is going to help your child successfully navigate adolescence. We cannot just chat our children to adulthood. Would that it were so simple as whiling away the hours at Starbucks or KFC shooting the breeze with the kids. At the end of the day, parents must not avoid the job that parents have always had—to say what they think about the challenges of the day, to create environments and rules for their children and teens that reflect those views, to offer concrete guidance and set standards about sexual behavior, drug and alcohol use, and all the rest.

Parents must be more than talkers. Parents must be parental.

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