

How I Raised Teenagers Who Tell Me Everything – Even When It's Hard



by Gracie X December 3, 2015 5:46 AM

SAVE



My teenage daughter was seeing a movie one night with a group of friends. When I called her to coordinate her Uber ride home, she didn't answer. Finally, two hours later, she answered her phone and told me she was on her way home. Something felt off.

I let her know how worried I had been not to hear back from her. The next morning she came into my bedroom and said, "Mom, I wasn't really at the movies last night. I was at a kickback." For those parents who haven't heard, it's basically a casual party with a bunch of teenagers "kickin' back." Original, huh?

We live in a mostly peaceful, fairly suburban wedge of a pretty large and sometimes very tough city. I knew that raising my kids in a diverse setting meant they'd encounter situations that required skill to maneuver. I needed to make sure they could make good decisions on their own.

So, starting when my children were in preschool, we've been playing a game in which I would describe a situation, then ask whether it was a health or safety issue.

Can you eat a pile of candy for dinner? No, sorry, this is a health issue.

Can you cross the street without holding my hand? Sometimes, depending on how busy the street is.

Any issue that fell outside the bounds of health or safety was one they were entitled to decide for themselves.

Can you go to school with your hair in knots and unbrushed? Sure, if your fashion sense is to look horrible, so be it!

These are my parenting parameters – these rules determine when I step in and when I lean back. So when my daughter told me that she had lied about the kickback, I went back to that rubric of health and safety. I calmly explained to her, “Sweetie, if I don't know where you are, I can't keep you safe. And that can create a dangerous situation.”

I ran a few scenarios by her: *What would've happened if the party had gotten rough? Or if you started to feel sick? Because of the lie, you might've felt hesitant to call me and ask for help. This is a safety issue.*

I did not shame or interrogate her – I also told her that while I consider her “very smart and capable,” life can deliver curveballs, and I want to help her catch them. She agreed to always tell me exactly where she was going, including the address, in the future.

I told a friend of mine, who is also the mother of a teenager, what went down. She asked me repeatedly why I didn't punish my daughter for lying. The thought hadn't occurred to me. My focus was on keeping the lines of communication open.

Subconsciously I must've felt that harsh discipline would give her reason to shut me out and lie again to get back at me; I wanted her to learn to make her own decisions and always come to me when those decisions were difficult.

Teenagers need to individuate from their parents and test out their own theories, rules, and values. But how do we make a space for individuation while keeping them safe?

[According to Advocates for Youth](#): “A major study showed that adolescents who reported feeling connected to parents and their family were more likely than other teens to delay initiating sexual intercourse. Teens who said their families were warm and caring also reported less marijuana use and less emotional distress than their peers. ... When parents and youth have good communication, along with appropriate firmness, studies have shown youth report less depression and anxiety and more self-reliance and self-esteem.”

If we want our kids to talk to us about *all* their challenges – including sex, drugs, and situations in which they might feel preyed upon – *and* we want to impart our wisdom to open ears, we must work on making communication a two-way street.

1. Allow your children to have separate thoughts and values.

Our children are separate people and might have different values. This can be incredibly challenging to deal with. For instance, a transgender teen in our community tried for months to win the approval of her father, who repeatedly stated that her sexuality went against his religion.

It wasn't until she attempted suicide that he saw the damage his rigidity was creating. Make an effort to see your teenager as a separate individual – and allow them to express their individuality – you don't own your child.

2. Be curious.

The greatest gift you can give a teenager is curiosity about who they are. When my kids were in kindergarten I started a game. I'd say, "Vanilla ice cream or chocolate ice cream?" "A vacation by the beach or in the mountains?" "Getting angry with me or getting angry with your dad?" I learned so much about them through this seemingly pointless banter. If you show curiosity about the little things, it'll open a portal into more open communication and connection.

3. Get a life of your own.

Are you hyper-focusing on your teenager to avoid your own life? Helicopter parenting is an epidemic these days. The revered psychoanalyst Carl Jung observed, "Nothing is a bigger burden on children than the un-lived life of the parent." If you want your kids to talk to you and confide in you, the first step is to make sure you've got your own life together.

Jung also said, "[Children are educated by what the grown-up is and not by his talk.](#)" Are you modeling a fulfilled person? Or are you attempting to live out unfulfilled dreams through your kids? Kids will stop sharing their lives if they sense your motives are tainted.

4. Deal with your own history and trauma.

I have a friend whose teenage daughter initiated a conversation with her about potentially having sex for the first time. During the talk my friend started crying and saying she was "worried and fearful" for her daughter. My friend was molested when she was 15 and, without intending to, was projecting her trauma onto her daughter.

This girl has since stopped talking to her mother about sex. When my bewildered friend told me this, I encouraged her to spend some time in therapy so that she could separate her painful experience from her daughter's very healthy natural explorations into becoming a sexual being.

Separate your history from the present-day experiences of your child. If you can't talk about difficult experiences, how do you expect your children to?

5. Learn to listen actively.

Are you listening as much as you are talking? Do you use "I" statements ("I want to make sure you are safe" versus "You are screwing up your life!")? If a conversation with your teen tends to evolve into a heated debate, step back and ask yourself whether you are disagreeing with your child's feelings or actions rather than intently listening with the desire to understand him or her better.

It's impossible to be a perfect parent, but if your intention is to guide rather than control, if you've examined your own motives and life, and if you really *listen* – you have a much stronger chance to have open, honest communication with your children.