

Newsletter #8

When Teens are in Trouble: What They Need From Their Parents

How you, as a parent, manage your reactions to finding out your teen has been in trouble and respond to them during crisis will impact:

- 1) how effectively the crisis is resolved,
- 2) the extent of the learning that takes place and,
- 3) your relationship with your teen.

Although there are many ways that even the most well-behaved and trusted teens can get in trouble, one of the worst is being involved in a car accident. In fact, fearing their teen will get into a car accident is one of the most intense fears that parents have.

A few weeks ago I did some counselling with three teenage girls who were involved in a car wreck. Thankfully, they survived with only bruises. The car, which had been 'borrowed' without permission, was a total wreck. The teen driver of the car had lost control and hit a parked car.

At the time of the accident, all three girls panicked and were not able to think clearly. They did, however, each have one thought, "I can't tell my parents because they'll freak out at me". So the girls tried to cope with their own emotional turmoil and panic and ended up running away to a friend's house. They actually hid the fact they had been in an accident. However, the truth did come out a few hours later as the police were doing their investigation.

What does it take to encourage a teen to face a problem directly rather than running away from it? How can you raise your children so that when something happens instead of fearing your reaction as their parent, they realize that they actually need your help and support in facing the problem?

What teens need most when in a serious situation are parents or adult caregivers that:

- stay calm so that the teen can reflect on what happened rather than focus on the parent
- help them **accept the consequences** they will need to face – without being yelled at or nagged
- can be responsible adults and take care of their own fears, anxiety, and anger and not react and take it out on the teen
- use the opportunity in the crisis situation to actually become closer to their teens instead of pushing them further away

Fortunately in the scenario above, after finding out about the accident, one of the girl's parents managed to change her pattern of reacting emotionally in anger with her

daughter. Instead of reacting negatively and pushing the daughter away, the parent chose to stay calm so that she could be the parent her daughter needed.

The parent invited the daughter to come home where she would be properly taken care of and to process what had happened. The parent worked on connecting and caring for the daughter rather than blaming, shaming, and nagging. After a supportive evening together, the next step was guiding the daughter through the consequences. This is the step where the learning and accountability can, and should take place.

Here are 2 insights into what that experience did for the daughter in her own words:

- 1) “ If my mother had freaked out then I would have *focused* on her freaking out and not on me (and what I did)”

- 2) “Because my mother didn’t freak out, I now feel all the shame, embarrassment, and guilt of what I did.”

Many parents would like to hear similar statements when their teen has gotten into trouble.

As parents, it’s in both our and our teen’s best interests that our children are not afraid of what we might do to them when they get into trouble. We want them to focus on their actions and not on the reactions of us, as parents. We want them to come to us for help especially when they are in a panic, scared, or confused.

When the parental ‘freaking out’ factor is eliminated it leaves room for the teen to look at what is really going on with themselves and even come to you for help. It encourages teens to be accountable and responsible. Most parents would welcome such a change in their teen.

This type of shift is more likely to occur if it happens before there is a big crisis. If you practice being calm and in control of your own reactions on an ongoing basis you will find any larger crisis much easier to deal with. The key is that you do not want your son or daughter to be afraid to come to you when they are in trouble and need you. You want them to feel close enough to you that no matter what happens they know they can come to you for guidance.