



H.O.P.E Newsletter – Issue 9

Saying NO to teens, without guilt

BY COLLETT SMART

As the years go by my advice to parents is getting more and more conservative. Should I buy my 14 year old alcohol to take to a party? No. Should I allow my 15 year old daughter to sleep with her 18 year old boyfriend in our house so I know she is safe? No. Should I accept that smoking pot is a normal part of growing up? That would be....No!

I can't work out what is so grey about keeping our kids safe. If you were to come to work with me for a day and see where one joint or one drink can take a teenager I promise you, you may not give in to peer pressure so easily. It only takes one uncalculated decision made in the wrong place at the wrong time – one knock out punch, one unknown drug, one drink too many, one night of unprotected sex, one “Don't worry about me I can look after myself Mum & Dad” – and lights out, it's all over.

NO

We actually need to take pride in saying a big, fat, “NO” sometimes. We aren't being mean or kill-joy. We aren't depriving our kids. Is there anything they don't have? Even the most disadvantaged kids I work with carry i-phones, i-pods and wear brand name clothes ranking up to \$500 per outfit. What they own and what they earn has no correlation. So I can, to a certain degree, understand why teenagers respond to 'no' with a, “What's that? Are you really saying no to me?”

The word 'no' has become unacceptable in many teenagers vocabulary. We say it, they hear it and then they reject it.

I find that many adults actually feel guilty for introducing a limitation to their teenager's world, especially if it isolates them from the rest of their peer group. Adults often feel the need to compare themselves to their teenage friend's parents to make sure they are 'normal parents'. Even back tracking or second guessing themselves.

Let me say this loud and clear – 'normal' isn't necessarily okay. Just because everyone else is doing it just isn't a good enough reason to put your teenager's life in danger. There are times when I'm horrified at what average families allow their teenagers to do. I've seen families allow their 14 year old teen and her friends to drink alcohol at home, despite the endless research about the negative effects on the developing brain. I've seen parents

allow their 13 year olds to wear sexualized clothing or t-shirts featuring naked women. Many turn a blind eye to the sexual activity their teenagers are bragging about online. Why are we so permissive?

I'm sure parents know they should be saying no, but for some reason they are finding it difficult to get the words out. I'd like to hear parents muster up the courage to say NO, without the guilt. A loud and proud, I'm-your-parent kind of NO that oozes a sense of responsibility and embracing love.

And when you say 'no' don't expect your teenager to say, "Great parenting mum and dad.... superb conviction." They are more likely to stomp their feet and pull out the line which makes every parent wonder if they have done the right thing – "Why don't you trust me?" Ahhhhhhh!

Most families have the "Why don't you trust me?" argument regularly. Teenagers use this argument to pressure their parents into letting them go places they usually wouldn't be allowed to go. But trust is not something that teenagers should hold over parents' heads and manipulate them with. You shouldn't be having endless discussions starting with, "Rachel's mum trusts her. Why can't you trust me?"

When a teenager looks at me and asks, "Don't you trust me?" I usually say, "Would you trust you?" To which they usually smile at me with a knowing smile and we leave it at that. Trust should be taken off the table as a bargaining tool.

My STRONG message to parents of high school age students is this – "Your job is to PROTECT them, not to trust them". Sure, trust them to put out the garbage, walk across the road safely or do their homework but for goodness sake let's not trust them to make life changing decisions that could alter the course of their future. Please don't try and give them the same trust you would give a mature adult as a token for growing up! It takes more than the ability to blow out thirteen candles to handle life well.

What you can't TRUST is that a developing teenage brain is able to make rational, logical, values-based decisions like an adult's brain can, especially under pressure. No matter how novel the idea of trusting your teenager is, the reality is, it is wrought with risk. The reasoning center of a teenager's brain simply isn't fully functioning until they are in their 20s. This means that they can think they are 'all grown up' when in actual fact they still desperately need your input.

These are some of the sexual risks young people are taking every day, many which I am sure are fueled by alcohol use....

- The majority of high school students (78%) have experienced some form of sexual activity
- 25% of year 10 students and 50% of year 12 students have had sexual intercourse
- 30% of sexually active teenagers are hopping from partner to partner, having multiple sexual partners in a year
- 25% of sexually active teenagers are contracting an STI in high school
- Only 69% of teens used a condom during their last sexual encounter

Is it any wonder that 1 in 4 of our young people are suffering from depression or anxiety?

Think about it. You took risks as a teenager. It's very normal to assume teenagers will test the boundaries. However, the problem is that the risks teenagers can take are quite different than the risks we took as teenagers. Moodiness, tantrums and friendship concerns have long been accepted as a normal part of growing up. These days we are witnessing unprecedented aggression, online addiction, self-harm, sexting and overt sexual behavior. Unfortunately today teenagers live in a highly sexualized world where young people go from the Wiggles to Katy Perry in one quick jump. They are making decisions about which boy they are going to kiss before they even turn 13 and what's complicating things even more is that social media has made all of their decisions so public. With one click of a mouse their choices are recorded forever.

After working with families for 13 years this is the advice I am 100% sure of....

- Don't trust teenagers to sleep over their boyfriend's or girlfriends' house but not have sex! Or use a condom or not get pregnant for that matter!!! For crying out loud!

- Don't trust them to make safe decisions about consuming alcohol! Giving alcohol to teenagers is poor parenting on every level. Their developing brains aren't built for toxic substances. (Did you know that it takes 30 days for the effects of alcohol to wear off on the teenage brain as opposed to 48 hours for an adult?)
- Don't trust them to use the internet wisely without any supervision (or buy them a smart phone that they carry around all day without any form of supervision) unless you want them to get addicted to pornography or have body image issues! Have you looked at the stuff that is shaping their concept of sex and relationships every single day?

Are all teenagers up to no good? Of course they aren't. But the truth is they don't have to be bad kids to make bad choices.

Expect your teenager to lie to you once in a while. Expect them to be bombarded by peer pressure and not always be able to see things clearly. Expect them to act like a teenager and expect to have to be their parent. It is your job.