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10 Things every parent should know to help keep their teens safe

- 1. Stay connected to them while understanding their need to individuate.** The adolescent brain is changing, beginning to think abstractly for the first time. Abstract thinking is a requirement for problem solving, and teens need to master this skill to make it in the adult world. This evolution to abstract thinking helps explain why teens now challenge their parents' opinions, limits and rules, why they turn more to their peers for advice, and why they separate physically and emotionally from their parents. This can be very frustrating and painful for parents, but it is critical that parents continue to show interest and start conversations on a positive note. When your teen wants to talk, stop whatever you're doing and give them your undivided attention.
- 2. Show up. Be available. Tell them you love them, often.** As teens negotiate the path to adulthood, they can be so dedicated to proving their independence that they reject everything their parents say. Even though they may not show it, they still need and want their parents' support, approval, and love. Offer support without making demands, try not to act out of frustration, and let them know that no matter what they are going through or how difficult they are acting, you will always love them and be there for them.
- 3. Listen first.** Teens need an open mind and some guidance now more than ever. If they fear their parents will discourage them from being truthful by displaying disappointment and disapproval, they'll pull away and not feel safe to open up. Just listen to them attentively without judging or reacting, and hear them. Ask them if they feel heard and understood. Keep listening and asking until they do. If you want to talk, once they feel heard and understood, they'll be more willing to listen to you.
- 4. Communicate without lecturing.** Allow for a give-and-take of opinions. Offer reasonable options. Brainstorm possible solutions together as partners, not opponents. When criticism is necessary, make sure it's the behavior and not the person that is being criticized. They probably will not show it, but teens still want your respect and approval. Be sure to let them know how proud you are of them when they make good decisions.
- 5. Admit your mistakes.** One of the most valuable things you can model for your teen is how to admit when you're wrong and apologize for what you may have said or done. It shows them that it is okay to be wrong or make a mistake, and takes them through the steps of making amends.

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- 6. Maintain a sense of humor.** An important lesson can be passed on to your teen in witnessing your ability to laugh and to keep worries and fears in perspective.

Some ways to say 'I love you':

- 7. Attend their "stuff".** Keep a schedule of their class projects and presentations, sporting events, musical recitals, plays, and performances, and attend as many as possible. Whether or not they demonstrate their appreciation now, they will always remember that you were there.
- 8. Little things mean a lot.** Leave them a note, send an email, put some fresh flowers in their room, plan a picnic, keep their favorite snacks on hand, and always say good morning and good night.
- 9. Take every opportunity to be part of their world.** Share their favorite music or TV show. Take car rides or go on shopping sprees. Regularly ask them about their dreams, encouraging them to think bigger and bolder. They'll feel cared about, and will look forward to spending more time with you.

10. Important questions to ask throughout the teen years:

- How well does your teen handle privileges and responsibilities? Does s/he demonstrate good judgment?
- Can your teen say "No" when s/he is uncomfortable?
- Does your teen have high self-esteem? Feel loved, appreciated, capable? How does s/he demonstrate it?
- How does your teen manage his or her emotions? Does s/he resolve conflicts with peers? How does s/he express hurt or anger?
- Can your teen discuss troubling or confusing things with you or others? Are difficult subjects discussed at home? If not, why not?
- Does your teen have friends? What do they do together?
- How well does your teen solve problems? What are his or her strengths? Weaknesses?
- How much time does your teen spend on the computer? Does s/he prefer it to socializing with friends and participating in activities? What sites does s/he visit and what games does s/he play?

This material is provided for informational and educational purposes only, and is by no means an all-inclusive list of factors involving teen safety. For further information or help with related issues, please call me at **(818) 591-2989 or (805) 375-5860** or call another licensed mental health professional.