

## **Thriving During the Teenage Years - Can Teens Be Trusted?**

By Dr. Jan Hittelman

Boulder Valley School District, November 2008

As concerns rise regarding teen substance abuse, Internet activity, text messaging, etc., many parents out of fear are “clamping down” and policing their own children. Many “experts” are recommending parents periodically search rooms, monitor cell phone use, text messaging, computer use, and Internet sites visited. Under certain circumstances, if your teen has repeatedly violated your trust, has a known substance abuse problem, or has a psychiatric disorder that requires a high level of monitoring, I would agree with this approach. I most certainly would not recommend that every parent start policing and checking up on his or her teenage child. The real challenge for parents of teens is trying to balance developing a trusting relationship with looking out for your child’s well being. I would encourage parents to remember that most teens are not abusing substances, engaging in dangerous Internet use, text messaging, cell phone, or computer activity. I would encourage parents to remember that most teens are not abusing substances, engaging in dangerous Internet, text messaging, cell phone, or computer activity. Most of our children deserve to be trusted. If we have difficulty calming our fears, there are far more effective and respectful ways to help ensure that our children avoid a wide range of risk behaviors:

- Engage in frequent, mutually respectful, discussions regarding these behaviors. Try and listen more than lecture. Encourage your child to share his/her point of view. There is a wealth of evidence that when parents effectively communicate their concerns regarding risk behaviors, children engage in them far less often. Based on local YRBS data, high school students are 18 times more likely to think it's wrong for someone their age to drink if they believe their parents think it's wrong.
- Encourage your child to participate in the discipline plan regarding risk behaviors and consequences. This will increase the likelihood that they will take responsibility for their behavior and truly learn from their mistakes.
- Give fair warning. When/if you are considering monitoring your child’s behavior, let them know the reasons that you are doing so and be honest with them about what you are going to do. Losing the element of surprise is far outweighed by losing their respect.
- If your trust is violated, provide your child with opportunities, guidance and encouragement to regain your trust. As stated in last month’s Parent Corps News: “It is important to give your teen a chance to try again after a mistake. Mistakes are how we learn”.

Trying to find the right balance between trust and oversight will help ensure that we develop healthy, respectful, and lasting relationships with our children.