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Effective Communication with Teens By Paul J. Ashton, Psy.D., D.Min

Only the truth gains the victory, but the victory of truth is love.
-Saint Augustine Sermon 385,1

With blogging, texting, social networking, and any other number of technological jargon words that seem to have entered our lexicon overnight, the vast ocean that separates good communication between teenagers and caring adults seems to have become even more of a challenge to navigate. Not only do adults have the difficult job of providing a safe, secure, and loving environment, but they must teach values, respect and God's love all at the same time.

Society seems at odds with most things we want to accomplish with the young people in our families. Clothing styles and fashion trends, ads, commercials, television programs, movies, novels, and even some animated cartoons reek of sexuality, violence and the quest for the accumulation of material goods. All the while our Faith tells us not to seek praise in the eyes of the world, rather to seek truth in your heart and live this truth through the service of love to one another.

Caring adults often find themselves in a position where it may be tempting to act as a friend to their children which would more easily open up doors for trust and open communication. The role is a challenging one and caring adults should offer opportunities where children and teens can safely explore the world knowing what consequences lie ahead for broken rules, curfews, and lack of transparency about whom they spend time with, who their friends are and who the parents of their friends are. All the while, parents must insert their own important family rules, values, and regulations with a clear message that they will love their child no matter what happens, and the most important thing to do is to confide in their parents or another caring adult when they have questions, problems, concerns or doubts.

Frequent, short, "sound-bite" conversations which explain appropriate values can be added to any movie, newspaper, computer, or media discussion that takes place. Try not to allow an opportunity to pass by when you do not overlay appropriate values on a story that is shared about a school incident or one that is highlighted in the media. Using these teachable moments add up to a lifetime of thorough faith and value-centered education that doesn't appear to be insurmountable. Saving everything for one or two talks is not advisable. The communication needs to be honest, ongoing, and consistent. It can include humor or any other number of techniques as long as truth and love form the foundation of what you are trying to convey to your teens. As Catholics, we base our values on the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20, the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, the messages of God's Love in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the Precepts of the Church, and the traditions of our Faith revealed to us throughout history that lead us to the truth of God's love.

Each day holds opportunities to talk to teens about the importance of respect for their God-given bodies and how all life is held in highest regard. Building up a teen's self esteem and a sense of great purpose, dignity, and uniqueness comes with honest, open communication. Feedback about their behavior is crucial in forming responsible young adults. Here are some helpful hints when communicating with your teen:

- Be honest in telling them what he or she did well.
- Praise only those efforts and behaviors you sincerely believe were well executed.
- Offer gentle, but firm and respectful constructive ways to improve other efforts and behavior.
- Help correct ineffective behavior by offering alternative behaviors.
- Offer two positive suggestions for every suggestion for improvement.
- Begin and end feedback with a positive statement.
- Be specific about what was actually said or done.
- Be specific about why the action or behavior was or would be effective.
- Be clear about what could have been said or done instead, if constructive criticism is offered.

- Listen to your teens with full attention, not just with your ears, but with all of your senses—employ direct eye contact.
- Don't say something was well done when you don't believe it was.
- Don't guess at motives or assume anything. Ask direct questions and explore all opportunities to allow them to talk about how they think and feel.
- Don't focus exclusively on ineffective behaviors or only on positive behaviors.
- Ask for specific examples.
- View each opportunity as a learning experience for all involved.
- Don't reject feedback when you disagree... model receiving feedback in a non-defensive manner.
- Be curious about differing views, yet be clear and firm about your own values, views, and family rules.
- Ask for clarification.
- Paraphrase the content of the teen's message to check if you are hearing what they intend to say.
- Provide words for feelings and the affective part of what the teen struggles to articulate, for example "It can make some people really angry to talk about how they dress. I am wondering how you feel?"
- Periodically assess understanding of the message you are trying to convey.
- Ask the teen about how they can apply this message to their own stories and life experiences.
- Ask open-ended questions. Use what, when, where, why, and how to begin questions and not will, do, does, would, and have. The first group invites elaboration; the second elicits limited yes or no responses.
- Normalize the feelings of your teen and reassuring them by saying, "Many kids feel like you do..."
- Balance statements which offer opportunity for openness. Say things like, "Some teens feel scared and frustrated about this while others feel excited and energized by this."

It is important to set goals that are able to help the teen change behavior when necessary, as well as to plan for his or her future. Help your teen succeed by making sure that goals are manageable, realistic, specific and measurable, flexible, and successively more challenging.¹

¹ Interviewing, Counseling Skills and Strategies for Behavior Change, Patricia Faulkner, Jamie Stang, Susan Reynolds, pp. 147-151.