

PROM: A NIGHT OF MANY DECISIONS FOR TEENS

Parents help guide their children toward wise decisions, healthy independence

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It is one of the rites of passage that defines a child's approach to adulthood. It also is a time for kids to demonstrate how much they have learned about making wise decisions. If all goes well, many wonderful memories result. But, if the night goes badly, lives can be deeply affected.

Prom is an established part of our culture many young people look forward to with great anticipation. Much time, money, and effort are spent getting the perfect date, the perfect clothes, and the perfect flowers. Just as many decisions are made during and after the event as are in preparing for it. With so many decisions at hand, teens often seek the advice of friends, parents, and adult mentors.

This advice is crucial to helping children make wise decisions and gain a sense of healthy independence. A teacher we know understands this all too well. A week before the prom, a student of his seemed preoccupied with something other than schoolwork. When the teacher asked why, the student said that he and his girlfriend had decided to lose their virginity on prom night. Since they had not had sex before, they were both quite nervous.

The student's honesty and frankness surprised the teacher because, although they had a fairly positive teacher/student relationship, such sensitive issues had never been discussed before. The teacher felt quite awkward and did not want to delve much into the subject. He made a statement about sexually transmitted diseases and quickly ended the conversation.

Prom night came and the boy and his girlfriend did not have sex. However, as often happens when kids are given little guidance, their "replacement behavior" had even more serious repercussions. Instead of having sex, they drank heavily at an after-prom party, and on the way home were involved in a serious car accident. The sad fact is that the boy's girlfriend and two friends lost their lives. The boy suffered a brain injury that left him paralyzed.

This story is, of course, an extreme. However, in the extremes of life we can often gain an understanding of how to deal with the everyday.

If the student's teacher and parents could go back, three basic principles could have helped them prepare that young man to make better decisions:

Principle #1: Demonstrate the lessons you want your children to learn. Parents who stay out late without notifying their teens or drive away from a fender-bender are teaching their children the wrong priorities. These parents are not very effective when they tell their kids to behave. Remember the old saying, "You're actions speak so loud, I can't hear the words you say."

Principle #2: Give children information without telling them what to think. Providing a person with information without telling them what to do with it is a skill many adults never consider. However, doing so avoids many of the opportunities for power struggles that result in rebellion. It's even hard for a teenager to snarl back when a parent says, "I felt really panicked and sick when you weren't home last night when we had agreed" and then waits quietly for the teen to respond.

Principle #3: Focus the conversation on how your child's behavior will eventually affect them. Kids often view their behavior as affecting others. As a result, young people often need guidance to understand they are actually the primary recipients. Upon one teen's announcement to her father that she could have sex whenever she wanted, in response, her dad paused, and with empathy said, "Honey, you're right about that, and I'm sure you can handle being pregnant and raising a child on your own."

A word of caution: Too often, parents use threats, intimidation, and humiliation in an attempt to force their children to avoid tragedy. Unfortunately, when punishment and reward are the only methods of control, kids start to believe doing what the adult has warned against is a sure way to feel independent. It is more effective for kids to learn independence is best attained by learning to making wise choices.

The goal of Love and Logic is to guide children into wisdom. Raising our kids to be ready for important decisions is best done as a regular part of our parenting, rather than an after-thought as they are walking out of the door.

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