

Critical Condition:

Crucial Conversations with Teenagers



By Lucy Rimalower

1 out of 3 parents is “unable or barely able” to have a crucial conversation with their teenagers. So says Joseph Grenny, author of the New York Times bestseller *Crucial Conversations*. Grenny, who partnered with the White House on the campaign Parents: The Anti Drug, continues to do research on how parents can play a greater role in their teens’ choices.

Communication is often the problem and the solution to the problems in the relationships between teens and their parents. Parents who are able to have crucial conversations with their teens are more likely to describe a “very good” or “extremely good” relationship with their children, are more likely to describe their children as happy and healthy, and more likely to describe their children as productive members of society.

Grenny suggests several ways for parents to engage more successfully in critical communication with their teens about tough issues such as drugs, friends, sex, internet safety, and education.

Reduce negative assumptions: Grenny describes “The Villain Story,” the judgments we make in anticipation of the conversation. Communication may be impacted not only by a parent’s willingness to engage his child about a difficult

issue but also by a parent’s belief about his child’s willingness. This is also true for teens who may bring their own negative assumptions to the table.

Don’t be afraid of tough topics: A topic’s riskiness may also be a deterrent to the conversation. I’m not sure if it’s the teens or their parents who work harder to avoid talking about sex, drugs and driving but sometimes it helps to acknowledge the awkwardness and fear about these conversations.

Peer power: If your teen’s peer group disagrees with your values or boundaries, you may have to work harder to expand your teen’s decision-making matrix. Create direct experience, an opportunity for kids to draw their own conclusions. Tell a story from your life or find someone who is trusted by your child to tell a story.

Head first, mouth second: Grenny advises parents to think through how a reasonable, rational person can get through the “normal teen junk” and approach their teens respectfully with facts before judgment.

Establish mutual purpose: If parents and teens can believe that they both have something to gain from a conversation, the interaction can be less defensive and it’s easier to hear each other. For example, your teen’s statement “I want freedom to hang out with my

friends” is not mutually-exclusive with your statement “I care about what you and want what’s good for you now and in the long-term.”

Before you chastise, show you care: This strategy allows teens to talk about how the problem is affecting them, before parents delve into disappointment or consequences. Beneath the rolling eyes and increasingly blacker eye makeup, your teen still cares what you think.

Start now: Crucial conversations should start when kids are little. Get them in the habit of talking with you about the tough stuff, from social struggles to internet safety. Invite dialogue even if you and your child disagree.

Finally, Grenny spoke about the challenging issue of trust and suggested a very useful tenet: “Nobody should trust themselves under the wrong set of influences. Under the right set of circumstances, trust that you will behave appropriately.” This may be as true for teens as it is for their parents.

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