



## NAVIGATING MODERN TEEN CHALLENGES

### *INSIGHTS ON MINDFUL PARENTING*

**Children today may not have to walk a mile in the snow to get to school, but growing up is arguably harder than ever.** Adolescents and teens have new challenges, such as every action being tracked publicly online, the consequences of missing half of their formative school years from COVID, or being asked for nude pictures by the person they're dating online. Similarly, the challenges of parenting haven't gotten any easier either. I've served as an overseas Adolescent Support and Counseling Services (ASACS) counselor for military children for nearly 15 years, and I'd like to offer parents a few core principles to better navigate these modern teen challenges while continuing to maintain a healthy parent/child relationship.

#### Have Open and Honest Dialogue

When I ask parents if they've had the chance to talk to their child(ren) about controversial topics, I often get an answer: "No, but they know better." Nearly every five-year-old will tell you that it's not good to lie, steal, or smoke — yet I promise you, the juvenile delinquents I've worked with in the past "knew better," too. Despite "knowing better," teens by nature will engage in impulsive thinking and behaviors much more so than adults, and a thought that should send shivers up your spine: If they're not learning about drugs/alcohol from you, they're going to be learning about it from some random website they're pulling up on their phone at two in the morning. Much of this can be remedied by having open and honest dialogue with your child—we can't prevent all "accidents of youth" from happening, but creating a safe space for dialogue will hopefully deter some of their bad decisions from worsening.

#### Don't Pull Rank

I feel much better when my parents say, "I'm the parent. You have to listen to what I say, and no talking back!" said no teenager ever. Sometimes, talking back can be a sign of disrespect, but arguably, cutting off one's voice is worse and can stop someone from speaking up when needed. Unsurprisingly, the majority of teens that I've worked with who feel like they don't have a strong relationship with their parents are also those who "don't talk back." Remember, the point of parenting is to help launch our children into adulthood, and part of being an adult is to teach people how to learn and listen to one another, even if we don't necessarily like what we're hearing.



Having **open and honest dialogue** can go a long way.

## Zero Plus Zero Will Always Equal Zero

This isn't a math lesson but instead a reminder that the same questions will always lead to the same answers. In terms of parenting, if you're trying to get a different response from your child, be mindful of what already doesn't seem to work. I get comments from parents, such as, "She never wants to talk!" or "When I ask her how her day was, she just gives me one-word answers." Similarly, parents often admit that they only ask their teenagers when they come home or during dinner. I suggest finding ways to ask the question differently and/or under different circumstances—sometimes, the most powerful conversations can occur during the five-minute car ride to soccer practice.

## Get Uncomfortable

If you find yourself dreading having a difficult conversation with your child (e.g., sex or drugs), remind yourself that it's OK—every parent who's had to have a conversation with their child has probably felt the same way. The stress you may



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be experiencing is a signal that you're truly doing something new, and I often encourage parents to start embracing the uncomfortable moments with their teenagers—this is a sign that they're doing something significant and something that could lead to a positive result.

We can all agree parenting isn't easy. Growing up in today's world has become incredibly hard, but holding onto some core tenets as a parent can and will make things easier. If you're experiencing difficulties with anything I've previously outlined, ask your school if they have an ASACS counselor who will be ready and willing to help.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**James Koo** has been overseas with the ASACS program since 2011 and has been a ASACS clinical supervisor for both the Asia-Pacific region as well as the Germany-Bavaria region, which he is currently located now. Additionally, he has spent his career focusing on child protective services, domestic violence batterer's intervention, and DEI initiatives.