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KEEPING YOUR KIDS OUT OF TROUBLE

Do you have a child between the ages of 10 and 14? If so, it can be difficult to determine which behaviors are normal and relatively harmless compared to those that might be the sign of trouble. Virginia Molgaard, a family life specialist from Iowa State University offers this advice.

When children are between 10 and 11 years of age parents often notice new behaviors and their child's desire to try new things. Parents may not be comfortable with the way their child dresses or acts. However, many of these behaviors are "normal" for children that age including:

- An interest in clothing, hair, and music fads.
- Occasionally coming home late 30 minutes to an hour.
- Spending more time alone.
- Sharing less openly with parents and family members.
- Spending more time with friends.

Teens often become involved in some risk taking. Trying out for the team or the school play, calling someone for a date, or standing up for what he or she believes are normal examples of risk taking.

However, some risks are potentially dangerous even though they are completely normal. These might include:

- Dangerous bike riding
- Taking dares that are physically dangerous
- Taking rides with older teens or someone that has been drinking
- Experimenting with drugs, alcohol, or sex
- Minor acts of vandalism

Most parents want to protect their children and prevent them from becoming involved in serious problems. They fear the situations they hear about in the news – teen pregnancy, addiction to drugs and alcohol, serious car accidents, gang membership, and violence. Realistically, the majority of teens never become involved in these problems.

So what can you do? Know where your children are, what they are doing, and who they are with. It's especially important to keep track of your children between the age of 10 and 14. These tips might help:

- Work with your child to decide a few important rules – curfew times, off-limit places, and activities.

- Insist that your child call or leave a note if plans change.
- Together with your child develop consequences to expect when rules are broken.
- Spend fun time with your child to build a positive relationship.
- Show your child that you are interested in his or her activities.
- Listen with an open mind when your child talks about problems or concerns. Avoid lecturing and jumping to conclusions.
- Know your child's friends and their parents.
- Encourage involvement in school and extra-curricular activities.

As children grow older, especially when they are able to drive, parents must realize that monitoring what their child is doing has limits. In fact, most teens occasionally rebel against some of the parental rules. Overprotection, forbidding them from seeing certain friends, accusations, and unfair punishment actually can increase your teen's chances of having problems.

Parents must be able to recognize when a problem is serious and seek the help that is needed. Acceptable behavior varies with a child's age, and with differing family values regarding sex and alcohol. However, the following behaviors should **always** be of concern:

- Depression that lasts for two weeks or longer.
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs
- Promiscuous or unprotected sex.

Depression in teens can involve more than sad feelings or a sense of hopelessness. These feelings may indicate depression, but depression may show itself in other ways – irritability, anger, use of drugs or alcohol, or promiscuous sex. Generally a teen in serious trouble displays several symptoms.

Just as parents get medical help for their children's physical problems, they also have the responsibility to get professional help for problems such as depression or substance abuse. The 24-Hour Alcohol & Drug Referral Network (888-304-9797) can provide a list of treatment centers in this area.

The best prevention of these serious problems is a home with open communication and acceptance, an aware parent, and a teen's own growing sense of maturity and responsibility.