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DISPELL SOME OF THE MYTHS ABOUT TEENS

What is your image of a teenager? If it is based on media headlines, it may not be a very positive image. Karen DeBord, Ph.D., North Carolina Cooperative Extension, feels that teens are frequently misunderstood. Their image is often tarnished unfairly based on myths related to the teen years. She suggests learning the facts and dispelling some of the myths.

MYTH: Peer pressure is at it's worst during the teen years.

FACT: Peer pressure is overrated. It can, in fact, be a positive force. Adolescents usually select friends with similar values to theirs; however, parents still retain the major influence over the child's life. Research shows that parents who monitor their children can help to prevent risky behaviors. Monitoring gives children the message that with increased privileges comes increased responsibilities.

STRATEGY: Monitor children by establishing guidelines and limits. Know:

- WHERE your children are
- WHO they are with
- WHAT they are doing
- HOW they will get there and back again.

However, if parents expect to know these things about their children, they need to model this behavior by providing the same information to their children about themselves. Don't wait until the teen years to begin monitoring. This will make teens feel like you are trying to control them and it will turn into a power struggle. Start monitoring children early in ways that are age appropriate.

MYTH: Teens don't like to talk to their parents.

FACT: Teens like to talk, but they must have a willing listener. If your response to their conversation is simply "uh-huh", teens will find more interested listeners. Teens also tune out conversations that involve continual demands such as "Clean your room" or "Look at me when I'm talking to you". There must be a balance between routine chatter and deep conversation.

STRATEGY: Talk to your teen and also listen. Several hundred teens were asked what they wished their parents would discuss with them. The topics they suggested included: family decisions, vacations, money issues, sex, drugs, feelings, current events, their future, values, personal interests, and philosophical issues.

MYTH: If parents don't get control of their children, they'll be sorry later.

FACT: CONTROL may not be the right term. It is critical to seek a balance between parental control and teen control. Teens need opportunities to expand

their independence and freedom within the limits that are established. Be consistent. With so many working parents, teens today have more unsupervised time than ever before. There is greater access to information via the television and the Internet. Parents have a complex job being a filter to these influences.

STRATEGY: Listen to your child's request. Don't be too quick to say "NO". Listen to the details – say, "Convince me". Encourage teens to develop a sound argument based on facts. This is good practice for them and generates a less emotional discussion. Evaluate the request based on your child's maturity and ability to manage decisions. Involving teens in making decisions does not take away a parent's power. It helps to create a balance of power and control. It also lets teens know they are important and can work with you through important life decisions.

The teen years are a time of transition and change for both the child and the parent. Determine how you can best nurture your teen's development, but make decisions based on facts, rather than myths.