

Taking stock of our successes

Parents are doing a lot of things right when it comes to raising kids

BY EMILY MOSER

A quick check of the family schedule for the next week shows a busy one: taking your daughter to sports practice and staying awhile to watch, going to your son's evening music concert, planning a short family getaway to the mountain.

Or, maybe you're helping your kids study so they're ready for their math and science tests, then sending them an encouraging text message on test day.

If your activities and involvement look anything like that, it's worth taking a couple minutes to do something we as parents may not often do: pat ourselves on the back.

If you're like me, you probably don't take much time, if at all, to take stock of your successes as a parent. But doing so is energizing, because it enables us to see all the things, large and small, that we do to establish a strong foundation so our kids flourish. We can connect, in concrete and myriad ways, our actions to their growth as young people. And it also can help us improve how we interact with and support them so that we can be even better parents.

Maybe your accomplishments include helping your son's basketball coach during practice. Or letting your daughter know you're available to help her with homework, then checking in from time to time when she's studying to see how it's going. Or making sure you sit down to dinner regularly as a family. Have you watched a movie with your teen and seen on screen a young person involved in harmful behavior, such as drinking alcohol, and talked with her about it to get her perspective and use the situation as a teachable moment? Do you spend time with your kids doing things they and your family enjoy, whether it's being outdoors or playing a board game? Do you know where your kids are when they go out and do you set and enforce a curfew? Have you volunteered as a family from time to time to help those who are disadvantaged?

Our being engaged takes those and many other forms. And it *does* make a difference.

Research offers proof. Between 89 percent and 93 percent of youths say their parents would strongly disapprove of their using alcohol, cigarettes or marijuana, according to an analysis of data from the 2007 National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health.

And most youths, according to the survey analysis by the Center for Substance Abuse Research, say their parents are actively involved in their lives, based on the fact that their parents always or sometimes let them know when they had done a good job (86.2 percent), made them do chores (87.8 percent) and helped with homework (80.9 percent).

Research also shows that youths whose parents set clear rules for them, and punish them when those rules are broken, are less likely to report using illicit drugs.

There's lots of good news in those findings.

Yet, a red flag emerged from the national survey. Perceived disapproval of substance use and parental involvement decreased as youth got older. For instance, about 94 percent of kids ages 12 or 13 report that their parents would strongly disapprove of their alcohol use, compared to 85.2 percent of youths ages 16 or 17.

The survey authors noted that "previous research shows that youths who perceive that their parents disapprove of substance use and who report that their parents are involved in their day-to-day activities are less likely than those who do not to use alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs."

The fact that these factors decreased as young people got older indicates the need to be diligent about communicating our family values and rules, keeping our kids involved in those conversations so they feel invested in them, and staying involved well into their later teen years. That's critical, because the challenges of growing up and raising kids certainly don't diminish as they move beyond adolescence.

So, for sure, keep offering to help your teen with their homework. Take time from your busy schedule to hang out together doing something fun and that's a change of pace. Know where your kids are and what they're doing. Continue to take stock of your successes, and celebrate theirs. And be ready to step on the gas in terms of your involvement in their lives as your kids get older.

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