

Child & Youth Advocacy: Connecting With Your Teenager

Speaker 1:

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Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today's topic is connecting with your teenager. For today's discussion, we are joined by Renee Roman. She is a licensed social worker with more than 30 years' experience. Renee, welcome to the podcast.

Renee Roman:

Hi. It's great to be here.

Bruce:

Thank you for joining us. Before we begin, could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Renee:

Certainly. I am a licensed social worker. I've been working in the field for over 35 years now. I've specialized in work with adolescents, children and their families.

One of the areas of concentration that I'm currently most involved in as a trainer and consultant is problematic sexual behavior, so working with families and youth who've engaged in problematic or illegal sexual behavior, as well as working with the communities that surround them in order to make a safe community and a safe place for these youth to be able to get community-based treatment.

Bruce:

All right. Well, what are some of the most common challenges that teens are facing today?

Renee:

I think, first of all, we need to take a second and just remember what it was like when we were teenagers. As teens, there's so much going on in their world, as was in our world, but I think even more for them than for us. These kids are struggling to figure out their place in the world. They're trying to pull together all of those disparate parts of themselves.

I may be an athlete or a math whiz or a chess player or an actor, and how do I put all of those things together into one person? Who do I want to be in this world? How do I fit in with my peers? How do I fit in with my family's expectations? Where do I see myself in the future?

While they're trying so hard to figure out who they are, they also have all of those hormonal changes that are going on in their bodies and all this growth happening. There's just a whole lot of changes in just about every aspect of their lives that's happening as a teenager.

Bruce:

Right. How can parents better relate to their teen during these times?

Renee:

I think, first, try to remember what it was like when you were a teen. But even thinking back to what it was like when you were a teen. Some people have teenage years that they would go back to any day of the week and do over again, and others are like, "Gosh, if I never ever had to visit my adolescent years again, that would be great for me."

But just trying to remember what that period of time was like for them, but then recognize that I think even now with our teenagers these days, there's so much more pressure on them. They have the access to the internet, that they're constantly in connection with people through their phones and through computers and through their gaming systems, and that puts a lot of pressure on them.

As well as we really are in a society that's requiring our teens to be thinking much earlier than maybe for some of us what they want to do after school, who do they want to be, and start planning and plotting for that much earlier in life than maybe we started.

Bruce:

What are things that parents can try to get their teens to open up some more?

Renee:

Opening up. I think it's really important that parents plan some time to be able to have conversations with their kids, something that's predictable for them. Maybe they always go and do errands together on a certain day of the week or they always cook dinner together on a certain day of the week, something of that nature, so that kids know that they're going to have their parent, particularly if there's multiple kids in the home, to themselves for a period of time to be able to have conversations or to bring up things.

I think it's really important that parents frequently have conversations with their kids and that they don't shy away from maybe some of those harder topics or those topics that as a society we tend to avoid, topics about relationships or sexuality, all of those kinds of things.

I think that having those conversations, or at least opening those doors to topics, to ask kids how they're doing, ask them what's happening in their world, how are things with their friends, those kinds of things, engaging in those conversations makes kids know that these are OK topics for us to be able to talk about, so if I have questions, I can come to you, I can talk to you, you have made that an OK thing for us to do.

Bruce:

Looking at some outside factors, looking at friends, especially social media, something we definitely didn't have when we were teens, how are these outside factors influencing teens?

Renee:

So many different ways. First of all, it is a place to go for information. Kids will go there when they have a question, that is their go-to, type it in, ask Google, ask Alexa, somebody will answer your question.

Unfortunately, the sources of the information that they get aren't always the best sources and they don't always get the best information. That's one of the reasons why I think it's really important that parents also present themselves as a source for their kids.

The other thing that can happen on social media is that when kids do go and maybe they're asking personal questions or things about topics that it's hard to talk to adults about, it can open them up to being actually a victim to someone to take advantage of them in some way or to try and take advantage of them.

I think it's just really important for parents to be aware of how much access their kids have, regardless of age, to social media and who they're communicating with. These days, kids will describe their best friend or the person they're dating as someone who is off in California or perhaps even in a different country, when prior to social media you usually dated the people that were around you, the people that you had contact with.

But now, because of social media, kids can have contact with anybody basically anywhere in the world.

Bruce:

How does a parent's influence differ from these outside factors?

Renee:

It's a good question, Bruce. I think that we have studies that show that parents still have the biggest influence on their kids around those major decisions in life. If a parent talks to their child about sex and about sexuality and about relationships, we know that those youth are likely to engage in those activities at a later date than their peers.

We also know that parents still influence those big decisions around substance use and also about career planning, where they're going to be, what their hopes are for them in the future. Our parents still have the biggest influence on the big decisions, but our

peers tend to have more control over those everyday decisions that we're making, like what we're wearing and where we're going and how we act, those kinds of things.

Bruce:

Well, thanks, Renee. We're tracking a positive tone here. Should parents set expectations and boundaries for their teen, and if so, why?

Renee:

Absolutely. Parents need to set boundaries for their teens. It's great if you like your kid, but you really need to parent your kid. It doesn't do anybody any good to try and be their best friend. Parents need to let kids know what our values are in our family, what is important to us, what the rules are in our family, and in addition, what the consequences are if those rules are broken.

Most kids will complain about that, they'll complain about the parent who has a curfew or about a parent who calls ahead to make sure that there's going to be adults at the house if their child is going over there and say things like, "Nobody else's parent does that. Why do you always have to do that? That's so embarrassing," but the reality is, at the end of the day, what we know from teens is that they do understand that that means their parent cares, that their parent has an interest in them and that their parent wants what is best for them.

As much as they complain, they need it, they actually appreciate it, and I think it's really important that parents do that.

In addition to that, I think that parents need to be consistent in the messages that they give their kids. So that a youth who, say, is at a party and their friends are all encouraging them to drink or to do some substances or some things that are present at the party, if the kid says, "I can't do that, my parent would kill me." If the parent has consistently given the message that that's not OK, they haven't given times where it was OK in their house, that their friends are well aware that the parents give the message that that's not OK, it's easier for that youth to back out of that behavior and not engage in it as opposed to trying to say that and them being like, "Yeah, but your parents were partying with us last weekend," or, "But your parents bought us stuff two weeks ago." It's much harder for the youth to be able to use their parent as a way to avoid peer behavior while still saving face.

Bruce:

OK, so boundaries can really serve a purpose for the teen, but can there be too many boundaries, too many expectations that you set upon a teen?

Renee:

Yeah. I think that I often like to think about adolescents very much like I think about when my kids were 2, like toddlers. When kids are toddlers, they have to try to stand up, that's the first part of walking. We know that several times when they stand up they fall down, but as a parent you're there to catch them. You let them hit their bottoms on the

floor, but you're making sure they're not hitting their heads off of things, those kinds of things.

You're there to protect them, guide them, but you still allow them to engage in a behavior that may surprise them when they actually fall down. When they start taking steps, again, you've got your hands around them to make sure that they don't bump into things or fall and hurt themselves, but you let them stumble and you let them fall.

The same is true of our teenagers when they are making decisions in life that parents are thinking, "Well, that's not really the best decision," we're still there to protect them from making those poor decisions that can have major consequences in their lives. We're still there to try and buffer some of that behavior, but we do have to pick our battles.

We can't battle over every single thing, we can't have a rule around every single thing. We have to really hope that the time that we've spent with them, the values that we've modeled for them, the values that we've communicated to them and that we've lived in as a family, that they've internalized those and that those are going to impact the decisions that our kids are making.

Bruce:

It's interesting, you talk about managing growth opportunities, managing failure. At what age should we be establishing boundaries with a teen?

Renee:

I think those boundaries need to start very, very early, way before adolescence. If you think about when you greet a family member, for example, or they're leaving, very often parents will say, "Go give grandma and grandpa a kiss goodbye. Give uncle so-and-so a hug," and when kids balk at doing that, they're like, "Go on. You're going to hurt their feelings if you don't do that."

I think that we really need to take a step back from that and we need to teach kids that they don't need to hug someone that they don't want to hug and they don't need to kiss someone that they don't want to kiss, regardless of whether or not that hurts the other person's feelings. That teaches kids that they have agency around their own bodies and who has a right to touch them and who they have a right to touch.

We start teaching our kids about some boundaries around their bodies, as well as consent in its earliest forms, and that those lessons will carry over for when our children reach adolescence and they are entering into relationships with partners.

It also opens up that conversation, that they don't have to do anything that they don't want to do and that they need to ask their partner's permission in order to engage in certain behaviors. I think when we start those lessons very, very early, when our kids are young, that those lessons can transition as they get older and as they start exploring different relationships.

Bruce:

These lessons are not one-way conversations, they're engagements, they're two-way conversations. Talk to us a little bit more about this. What conversations should parents have with their children that may ease these challenges?

Renee:

I love that you used the word conversation. I think a lot of times, parents in particular when they're talking to children, their children, they think that they can predict what their child is going to say or, "Oh, I know where this conversation is going, so I'm going to head it off. I'm going to save myself some time here."

I think that as caregivers, as parents, we need to take the time to listen to our kids, to listen to all that they have to say on whatever topic we're conversing on.

I think also, as parents, we tend to want to jump in and solve the problem for them. I think that it's very, very important that we don't do that, that we let the kid solve those problems themselves if they want to. We may ask, we may say, "I think I have some thoughts about what might help in the situation. Do you want to hear that?"

If the kid says no, they may have just wanted to vent, they may just want to be processing things out loud, but they want to solve that issue themselves, that we need to engage in those kinds of conversations.

I think no matter the topic, if we engage with our children in that way and allow them some room to make their own decisions, run those decisions past us if they want for our opinion, that from a young age they learn that that's an OK thing to do with this parent, with this caregiver, which is really, really important when we start looking at them potentially making decisions that can be dangerous for them, that can put them at risk for either getting hurt or getting into some kind of trouble.

So listening, not interrupting, asking lots of open-ended questions, good questions to help them figure out where they're at and what they're thinking about it, and then not trying to solve the problem for them, but offering to be there to bounce off ideas or to ask permission to offer your own thoughts, I think are the best ways to approach those conversations with our kids.

Bruce:

This has been a very valuable conversation, a lot of good information. As we wrap up, I just invite you to share any other advice with parents on this subject.

Renee:

I think that I've mentioned a couple times that as a society we tend to avoid or skirt around subjects around relationships and sex and those kinds of things and sexuality, but I think that it's really important that parents have those conversations with their kids. I sadly have worked with many, many youth who have gotten into trouble because they haven't been aware of laws around those types of behaviors, they haven't been aware of what the age of consent is. That can be really complicated for folks in the military, because if you're OCONUS, is it the age of consent in the country that you're at,

is it the age of consent on the base, is it federal laws, is it the state that you're living, and sometimes it's even where you are on base.

I think that parents need to do some research into knowing what is the age of consent in the state that they live, and then how do they let their kids know what that is and how that can impact them and the decisions that they're making.

Then also on the topic of consent, to talk to their kids about what that really means, that consent isn't something that's given one time and it's over. Consent isn't something that's just implied, if a youth is with a partner and they're kissing that partner and the partner seems to be enjoying the kissing that they can then take it to on the next step, that there needs to be a pause and there needs to be an ask.

We talk about an enthusiastic yes that the partner must give, just a, "I don't care," or a, "Guess so," is not an enthusiastic yes. That should really mean that the behavior stops at that point, that the youth doesn't take it any further.

It's hard for kids to understand that consent is something that needs to happen for each maybe sexual act that they engage in, but so, so very critical that happens so that people know they have a right to say, "Yes, I want to do this," or, "No, I don't want to do this," and also so that the person who is asking can clearly get the message that this is OK or that this is not OK. I think that if parents have those kinds of conversations with their kids and talk it through that they will go back to those conversations in their heads when they find themselves in those situations.

Bruce:

Such important information, we appreciate this. Renee, as we wrap up today's conversation, I just invite you to share any final thoughts on the topic.

Renee:

I think that adolescence can be a rough time, but it can also be such an exciting time. Through the process of adolescence you're launching your child into the adult world, and I think parents need to take some time to actually enjoy that and enjoy being with their children and doing things with them, to the extent of course that our adolescents will do anything with us, but I think just enjoy it and start that process of relating to them as a person, letting them become who they're going to be. It can just be an exciting time for everyone.

Bruce:

Renee Roman, thank you so much for joining us today. I want to point out that we have a number of resources in the program notes, and of course, you can contact MilitaryOneSource.mil. Our information for reaching the call center is on our website, you can speak to somebody directly on this topic.

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I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.