

How to Talk to Teens Who Don't Care About School

When your high-school junior or senior is on the verge of dropping out, what can you do?

David and his wife are struggling with their 17-year-old daughter. Her attitude is, "I don't care about school." She'd rather be hanging out with her friends.

Well, Dad, before exploding, I urge parents to look hard at the reasons behind the behavior. Maybe the child is over committed; maybe she's depressed or has a learning disorder. It could be some family situation that's distracting her—or a boyfriend. It could be substance abuse.

With David's daughter, it was a lack of interest. He decided to take away some of her privileges until she shows herself responsible enough to earn them back.

From there, a father has several options. One approach is to take responsibility for his child's education upon himself. That means checking with the school every day, calling teachers, driving her to and fro and sticking to his guns until she graduates. That's high-maintenance for you, dad, but it may be the only way for her to get that diploma.

Or, you can put it completely on her shoulders, and introduce her to the real world.

Say something like this: "I love you, honey, and I want to provide for you. And I can provide for you because I do at least an average job at work. But since you're not doing at least an average job at school, it might be time for you to make your own way in the world. Or if you want to live here, you can get a job, pay room and board, and pay for your telephone, transportation and cable TV."

Often, this shot of reality will motivate a child to apply herself at school. If it doesn't, then you need to set that deadline for her to start paying her own way.

Whatever approach you take, dad, make sure you sit down with your teenager and talk. Talk about her needs and goals and your expectations. If you can, help her see into the future—even just a year or two—and she may realize that sticking it out will give her more options later on.

And stay calm, dad. Remember that your job is to be helpful and love her through this—without being mean-spirited or imposing guilt.

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