Dear Alice,

My 15-year-old son has started to smoke. (We do not smoke, although I did smoke for 4 years some 22 years ago.) We have presented him with as much information as possible about why he should not smoke, he has committed to try to stop — but I am not sure how much pressure to put on him — do I continue to ask? I am tempted to leave him some of the information I found here and on tobacco.org — only as a reminder.

I want to trust him and believe him, but I do not want to be stupid and gullible as well. I guess trust is more important, and he has earned that in the past — so I might as well continue now.

Thanks for listening and I really would appreciate any comments.

—A concerned Mother

Answer

Dear A concerned Mother,

Given that you’ve successfully quit years ago, you know that it takes tremendous willpower and motivation. Many teens begin smoking because their friends and family do, so the fact that you have quit already may help you relate to your teen as he works on becoming a non-smoker. More than half of the young people who smoke want to quit, and have tried, but quitting can be just as hard for them as it is for adults.

So, what strategies might work to get young people to quit, or at least to cut down? Firstly, be supportive! Yelling, punishments, threats, and commands tend to create barriers. Encouraging him create a list of why he smokes and why he wants to quit might be a good start. Reasons other teens have given for wanting to quit include smelling/looking good and having more available cash. Setting house rules that limit the opportunity to smoke like no smoking in the home, no smelling like smoke at home, or smokers wash their own clothes, may also make sense for your family.

Something else to consider: since you’ve spoken with your son about quitting, he is likely aware
of the harmful health effects of smoking. Passive reminders about why smoking is unhealthy may not be effective as motivation to quit at this point in his life. A more effective tactic might be to continue to have respectful, frank discussions with your son about your concern for his health and your hope that he will quit. You might also ask questions like: What are the biggest reasons you can think of to quit? Do you see yourself as a smoker when you’re an adult? What would make you feel ready to have your last cigarette? Having these types of conversations might help you and your son approach the issue as a team, rather than potentially feeling like adversaries.

Another option is helping your teen to make a plan for how to quit. Here are a few strategies you could try:

- Help him pick a date to quit and write it down, though you might try to avoid very stressful times like final exams.
- Help with practice “saying no” if friends are also smokers, or encourage friends to quit as a group.
- Talk about withdrawal including the signs, symptoms, and how to cope.
- Look into nicotine replacement therapy like the gum or patch. These were not designed for teens, so you will probably want to talk to your health care provider to find out whether this is appropriate.
- Find additional support. Some hospitals and clinics have quitting support groups specifically for teens. You can also find support online — Smoke Free Teen offers support online, by phone, or by text message (they also have a lot of other great resources to help teens quit).
- Talk about what triggers him to smoke and what he could do instead of smoking on those occasions. Things like chewing on gum, sucking on hard candies, and avoiding places where you usually smoke have been known to help.
- Work on a plan for slip-ups. Remind him that it doesn’t equal failure! It’s helpful to examine why a slip-up happened and what can be done in the future to avoid it. Continuing to focus on the reasons for quitting is key.
- Plan rewards along the way. This is a tough process so rewarding your son every couple of weeks or once a month is a great way to encourage him to stay a non-smoker!

As you know, your son is getting to the age where he has enough independence to make many decisions for himself, including whether he will smoke. You mention that your son has earned your trust in the past — entrusting him now with making his own decision about quitting smoking may help keep the paths of communication open, even if he continues to smoke for the time being. Knowing he can turn to you for support will be a great relief, whenever he decides to quit.

Wishing your family health,

Alice!

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