

# Staying Connected—Even Through the Tough Times

By Dr. Joanne Stern, author of *Parenting Is a Contact Sport*

It was Saturday night, and for a minute, both hands on the kitchen clock stood straight up. It was midnight, and Chloe was not home. Her parents exchanged disgruntled looks and began to discuss how to handle their teenage daughter who missed her curfew for the second time that month. Did she forget or had time simply slipped away? Was she testing them or did she not even care? And did it really matter because, in the end, she *was* late.

This is the incident that brought Chloe's parents to my therapy office. They were both concerned that Chloe was bending the rules - - - a little bit. Dad wanted to mandate her to obey to the letter of the law, but Mom was somewhat softer. I talked with them about establishing a respectful and trusting relationship with Chloe and relying on this relationship as their basic parenting principle. I explained to them that they *could* revert to trying to rule with an iron fist. However, there is just no way to ensure 100% control over your kids. There's no guarantee they'll do what you want them to do even when they're in the room with you—let alone when they're out of your sight! If parents don't build and nurture a relationship with their kids when they are very young, then when they grow old enough to figure out that they don't *have* to obey, they won't. And you lose your ability to talk with them, to walk by their side and to guide them through difficult times.

Exerting power and control, like Chloe's Dad wanted to do, simply causes kids to close up, sneak and hide, and it cuts off the opportunity for parents to advise them. Being permissive implies that parents listen to their kids but don't set limits or say "no." But having a strong relationship means that we talk openly with our kids—and they talk openly with us—even about the difficult stuff, giving us maximum input into their lives.

Sometimes we forget that kids *will* be talking. They will be talking to someone, because that's what kids do. They may be talking to their peers who are as young and immature and inexperienced as they are; kids who are competitive with them or jealous of them—here today and gone tomorrow; kids who get their information from exaggerated, distorted media; or kids who abuse alcohol and drugs.

Or they could be talking to you. Thankfully, you don't have to be a child psychologist or an expert in human development to be the most valuable person your kids can talk to. In fact, it's moms and dads, step-moms and step-dads, who *should* be providing counsel because we know our kids better than anyone else, we love them most and we have their very best interests at heart.

## Staying Connected—Even Through the Tough Times (Continued)

And that is *why* it is our job, as parents and step-parents, to create and secure a relationship so solid that nothing will sever it—a connection so strong that it won't falter or fail, even in crisis or calamity. The teen years are one of the most critical times in our children's lives. They are wondering about their emerging identities, what it means to be growing up and what life will be like for them in the future. They are facing decisions about dating, drugs and alcohol and sex on a regular basis. And they need our support, our influence and our guidance more than ever as they wade through the confusion of these uncertain years.

I continued to talk with Chloe's parents about growing and nurturing a relationship with Chloe—a close bond that would allow her to continue to talk with them as she grew older and the issues became more important than whether she came home fifteen minutes late on a Saturday night. Dad would not hear of it. But Mom caught the spark! She continued to talk with Chloe while Dad kept banging on the rules. Chloe was a responsible young woman, never veering too far off course, and each time she did go too far, she and her mom talked. Mom listened and listened without judgment, criticism or put-downs. She learned to honor Chloe's mistakes as an inevitable part of her growing up. And Chloe learned from those mistakes as her mom shared her own wisdom and experience. Today Chloe is a remarkable adult, and she continues to have a close and intimate relationship with her mom. Her dad? Well, they hardly have any relationship at all. Because he believed more in the rules than he did in his daughter, he missed out. How sad!

Chloe wasn't perfect—no kids are. And we parents aren't perfect either. Kids will certainly get into a little trouble and make their own mistakes. What they need is a trusted mentor and coach to help them as they are stumbling into new arenas and trying to find their way. Our job as parents is to be there for them. The relationship we build with our kids when they are young can and should endure the storms of adolescence. This bond survives anything life throws upon us. It moves us from doubt to confidence that we can handle the turbulence of the teen years. And it is the greatest gift we can give our kids.