What are our teenagers thinking?

All behaviour, whether it be that of children, adolescents or adults is influenced by the way they think. We all have values, viewpoints and morals that shape our thinking. It is hard to change the way we act, if the way we think about our behaviour doesn’t change.

As parents of adolescents we often wonder “What were they thinking?!” when we hear about the kinds of choices that they have made. In many families this is likely to be a fleeting question uttered in frustration, followed by a lot of advice or an instruction about how they should behave.

“You shouldn’t be angry about not getting a good mark for that, it’s your fault you didn’t study hard enough!” is a typical statement parents say when their teenager shows disappointment about their grades. While the parent’s statement in this situation might be true, the comment is often taken as a criticism and can lead to a defensive response. No one wins in this scenario.

Parents can help shift the way teenagers view situations, so that they see it from a different perspective and have a better understanding of their choices and the potential outcomes. Young people tend to respond better when we show curiosity, ask questions and try to understand their point of view rather than asserting our parental authority or offering advice immediately.

At Parent Line we have professional counselors on hand to talk through the concerns you have about how your teenager is thinking and thus behaving. There is no magic wand that helps change perspectives but there are some things we can do that assist.

One of the best things you can do to influence your son or daughter is modelling the behaviour you would like them to develop. Some of the ways you can encourage them to think differently and consider other perspectives is to:
- behave in a way that invites feedback from others
- try to look at a range of perspectives when considering a situation
- ask good questions (e.g. open questions that invite a genuine response from the “What do you think about that? How did you feel when that happened? What was that like for you?”)
- listen to understand, rather than listening to respond (listen intently to what is being said, and not being said, to the content and the feeling and then repeat back what you have heard)
- create an environment where teenagers can safely express alternate viewpoints.

Changing the way we think about a situation changes how we respond to it and in turn changes how others respond to us. Thoughts are also the stepping stones to behaviour change, they are the foundation of habits and help mould the person who we are and who we want to be.

*Sow a thought, reap an action;*  
*Sow an action; reap a habit;*  
*Sow a habit, reap a character;*  
*Sow a character, reap a destiny.*  
Samuel Smiles

You can discuss any issues related to raising children with one of our professional counsellors, by calling 1300 1300 52 or visiting our website www.parentline.org.au for tips, information and stories about other parents’ experiences.

S Covey, 2005, “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” FranklinCovey USA