

Are You A Hands-off or a Hands-on Parent? **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

A recent study conducted by the Columbia University-based National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse looked at the effect of “hands-on” versus “hands-off” parenting on tween and teen behavior. Not surprisingly, the study found that kids who live in highly structured households (“hands-on” parenting) are at significantly lower risk for substance abuse and other risk-taking behaviors than are children who live in less structured homes (“hands-off” parenting). The behaviors examined included smoking cigarettes, substance use and abuse, and other risk-taking behaviors by the children as well as by their friends.

The results were based on over 1,000 telephone interviews of youngsters ranging from 12 to 17 years of age. Three levels of parenting were discerned: “hands-on”, “halfhearted”, and “hands-off”. About 27 percent of the kids reportedly lived in “hands-on” households, 55 percent in “halfhearted” parenting style homes, and 18 percent of the children described their folks as “hands-off” in their parenting style.

Which one are you? How about taking the test to determine whether you are a “hands-on”, “halfhearted” or “hands-off” parent? The following are the 12 indicators used in the survey to differentiate the parenting styles. According to the researchers at the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse “hands-on” parents agreed with at least 10 of the 12 indicators, “halfhearted” parents committed to about 6, and “hands-off” parents followed 5 or fewer of the rules.

INDICATORS

- Parents expect to be told where the child is going in the evening or on weekends and is told the truth by the youngster.
- Parents have made clear they would be “extremely upset” to find the child using marijuana.
- There are not periods of time after school or on weekends when parents do not know where the child is.
- Parents monitor what the child is watching on television.
- Parents impose restrictions on the kind of music the child is allowed to buy.
- Parents are very aware of how the child is doing in school.
- Parents monitor the child’s Internet usage.
- The family typically has dinner together six nights a week.
- The child has a weekend curfew.
- An adult is always at home when the child returns from school.
- The child is responsible for completing regular chores.
- The television is not on during dinner.

How did you fare? I have to admit that although I consider myself to be a very involved and observant parent (often accused by my own kids as a direct descendant of Attila the Hun), I barely passed muster as a certified “hands-on” parent. We definitely do not have

dinner together six nights a week. In fact, sometimes we don't have dinner at all! And, I have to admit that when we do eat together, it's not unusual for the TV to be on and that our focus is more upon the nightly news than upon each other.

But, I passed in all of the other categories. Fortunately I can arrange my schedule to be home from 3:00 on in the afternoons, and have been since the kids were born. I may be working in my den, or at the computer, or returning a client's phone call—but I'm there when the football team makes an impromptu visit to our backyard pool or a kid needs help with homework. Cell phones and answering machines leave no excuse for not checking in about who's doing what with whom, and consistent communication with teachers via report cards and progress reports are excellent ways of staying up with your kids' school responsibilities.

So, if strict, "hands-on" parenting is so successful in averting some kid risk-taking behaviors, why did the study find that the majority of folks are of the "halfhearted" or "hands-off" variety? In all fairness, not every parent can be home after school—many Moms and Dads work until late in the afternoon and kids are unsupervised between three and five o'clock. Aftercare and daycare programs are used by parents of young children, but are often not available for middle and high school youngsters. And, most of these kids put up such a fuss about having to be supervised that parents usually cave in, let them stay home alone, and hope for the best. If that's your situation, consider setting up a neighborhood network where your kids can stay at a friend's house after school, perhaps in exchange for your carpooling services in the morning. Or, offer to babysit your neighbor's little ones on the weekend in exchange for supervising your tween or teen after school.

Other than that, I believe that most parents can become more "hands-on" with some effort and attention to the 12 indicators. I'm going to be more consistent with dinner, and hey, if I can do it I'm sure that you can too! Kids need weekend and weekday curfews and these can be imposed if you're fair and consistent. Moving the computer to a more public spot in your home is a natural solution to monitoring Internet usage, and watching TV with the kids discourages viewing inappropriate shows. Of course, making these changes may temporarily place you lower on your child's hit list, but that's okay. Our job as parents is not to please our kids, or to keep them happy, or to provide them with a feeling of entitlement or privilege. Our priorities are to keep them safe and on track, and to teach compassion for others as well as self-responsibility and frustration tolerance.

"Hands-on" parenting works--I see that every day in my clinical practice and now research is backing that up. Sure, it may take greater effort, attention and involvement with your children on a daily basis than the "halfhearted" or "hands-off" parenting styles, and your kids may not show gratitude or appreciation for your efforts. In fact, they may be downright indignant about your increased involvement! But, dig your heels in and do what's right—your child's behavior, success, safety and accomplishment will reflect your concern.

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