

Kids and Tattoos

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Let's say that your sixteen year old daughter is driving you nuts about getting a tattoo—she just absolutely, positively has to have one in order to be happy. To hear the kid talk, it's as if she won't be allowed to sit with her buddies at lunch unless she comes to school adorned with a rose petal on her left ankle! Throw into the picture that she's usually a good kid, makes adequate grades at school, and except for a few forays outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior she's generally fairly polite.

You, however, may disapprove of tattoos in general, and especially not for your kid! Tattoos may bring to mind drunken sailors, women of the night or gang members, and you'll be darned if your child will be sporting one as long as you're paying the bills! However, your attitude is not playing well with the kid and she becomes insistent, demanding and moody when the two of you try to discuss it. What's a parent to do?

First, try to understand why a tattoo has become so important to her. Desiring a tattoo does not necessarily indicate that your child is having emotional or behavioral problems. In fact, in 1998 the Council of Better Business Bureaus reported a study showing that one in 10 adolescents had a tattoo, and over 50 percent of the kids questioned noted that they wished that they could have one. What does a tattoo signify to an adolescent and why is it so alluring?

For many a tattoo helps them with a sense of identity—it can connote belonging to a select group (perhaps risk-takers, non-conformists, tough kids or the rose-on-the-ankle crowd). Other teens are attracted to the permanence of a tattoo—the very thing that parents take issue with. Most adolescents see their lives as constantly in flux—parents divorcing, family transitions, uncertainties as to which clique they belong to on a weekly or monthly basis, and romances that end almost before they are begun. Many kids have mentioned to me that “at least my tattoo will be there—it's permanent and I chose it—I actually own it”.

Also consider the status that a tattoo can bring to a teen. From their point of view it may be symbolic of power (“I had the guts to endure the pain”), or control (“I talked my folks into letting me get one” or “I got tattooed even though my parents forbid me to do so”). Status is important to most of us, but especially to a teen that has to worry about being accepted by peers on a daily basis.

Others consider tattoos to be a fashion statement or a work of art. Adorning oneself with a classic design can be seen as enhancing one's looks, much the same as a stylish, but perhaps extreme haircut is an attention- getting statement.

Now that you understand why your daughter is so adamant about getting a tattoo it's time for her to listen to your thoughts. If she's convinced you that a small rose petal, perhaps placed in a non-visible location on her body is appropriate, then the issues to be dealt with are fairly clear-cut:

1. Selecting a professional artist who subscribes to the strict health standards of the industry.
2. Agreeing upon the design of the tattoo and where it will be placed.
3. Who will pay for the tattoo?
4. Understanding that tattoo removal is expensive, painful and frequently unsuccessful.

However, if you are adamantly opposed to the idea even after listening to her argument, be prepared to stick to your guns! As a psychologist I believe that the parent has not only the right, but also the responsibility to call the shots, especially when health issues or body modification are concerned. Be clear, concise and specific with your decision. “You will not be allowed to have a permanent tattoo placed on your body while you are living in this house and I am responsible for and providing for you. I feel that at sixteen you have no way of knowing how it will impact your life at twenty, thirty or forty. The tattoo may cause you great embarrassment when you’re in college or on the job, and it may also affect how others perceive you. When you are on your own and an adult, your body will be your responsibility and you will be able to make these decisions for yourself. In the meantime, I’d suggest that you try a non-permanent form of tattoo to see how you like it—it may be fun to be able to change it depending upon the occasion or your mood. But, the answer is “no” and you must abide by my wishes”.

If your child is especially ornery, she may find a way to get a tattoo without your permission. If you think that this is a possibility, warn her ahead of time that you will look into having it removed, and she will be responsible for the cost of the procedure. Hopefully she’ll realize that it’s a battle not worth fighting at this time, and that she can do as she pleases when she is older.

Saying “no” to a kid is not fun, but in many cases it’s necessary to do so in order to protect her from making a serious, permanent mistake. It takes guts to parent effectively—it’s often not easy, but if you listen to your child as well as trusting your values and instincts, you probably won’t go wrong!