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How to Make Your Home a Teen-Friendly Hangout

By Tamekia Reece

Having loads of teens lounging on your couch and raiding the fridge may not sound like a dream come true, but for many parents, it's an ongoing wish. If the teens are hanging out at your place, you don't have to wonder where they are or what they're up to. Sounds good, doesn't it?

If you'd like to reap the benefits of having your teen chill at home under your watchful eye, keep reading. Here are 6 steps to help you transform your home into the spot where all the local teens will want to hang out.

1. Ask What Your Teen Wants.

"The No. 1 way to find out how to make your home teen-friendly is to ask your teen," says Erin Brown Conroy, author of *20 Secrets to Success with Your Child* (Celtic Cross Publishing, 2003). "Sit down together and make a list of fun activities that fall within your family's guidelines for good, clean fun."

Be prepared to hear some crazy ideas. Instead of lecturing, laugh those comments off and join in the fun.

2. Stock up on Snacks.

Jessica, a 15-year-old Dallas teen, says food determines where she and her friends hang out. "If there's no food there, we're not there," she says, laughing.

Susan Isaacs Kohl, author of *The Best Things Parents Do* (Conari Press, 2004), says it's a good idea to ask teens what sort of foods they want. After hearing chips, pizza, soft drinks and more pizza, you should then throw in some nutritional common sense and stock up on healthy snacks, too. Remember that healthy doesn't have to be boring. Pizza can get a nutritional kick even if you only drop the pepperoni and add extra cheese. You might even try to get a bit more daring and add a few veggies to the pie.

3. Be Understanding of Teen Emotions.

Remember what it was like to be a teen? Erika Karres, Ed.D., author of *Mean Chicks, Cliques, and Dirty Tricks* (Adams Media, 2004), says you should try to remember, especially the mood swings. Why? Because if you plan to have a nice, friendly place for teens to relax, you must be able to deal with those moods. Karres says parents should expect turbulence during adolescence and need to be flexible, have a sense of humor and honor teens.

Isaacs Kohl adds that parents should work at being detached yet supportive of what the teen is going through. If every time your child is in a bad mood, you in turn snap at her, maybe you should reconsider if you really want teens hanging around all the time.

4. Have Teen-friendly Activities Available.

"Having good food is a must, but all the food in the world doesn't matter if all you can do is watch TV," says Keith, 17, of Yonkers, N.Y. While watching the tube is a favorite pastime for teens, it's a good idea to have other options available. Board games, playing cards, dominoes, video games and basketball are all things that keep teens happily occupied. If you're looking for something more, follow Brown Conroy's suggestions: "If your teen enjoys rollerblading, invest in putting down a cement pad. Or if it's ice skating, ice over a rink in the backyard."

While they might sound expensive, they're really not, and both ideas can be done as fun projects

between family and friends. Once you finish, chances are everyone will be gravitating to your home.

5. Grant Time off from Younger Siblings.

All families should spend time together, but when teens have company, they don't want little brothers or sisters butting in. Seventeen-year-old Courtney of California explains it like this: "Whenever I have friends over, I don't want to have to be on my best behavior because I'm worried my little brother will spill everything to Mom. I want to be comfortable."

Brown Conroy agrees and says teens should have time that's sacred and uninterrupted by siblings. "Just as adults enjoy 'adult time' with friends, teens are entering into the same dynamic of enjoying relationships on a higher level," she says. A good idea is to arrange for one parent or a friend to take the younger kids to the zoo or out to a movie when your teen is having friends over. This not only keeps the younger ones occupied, it gives teens time off.

6. Be Respectful.

Probably one of the most important things you can do is to show your teen and his friends that you respect them. Be sure to smile and as Isaacs Kohl says, "act welcoming even when they come in dirty from playing football or wet from being out in the rain."

Some teens don't have attentive parents, so take time to listen to their social and academic experiences. "Having someone to talk to, in addition to their parents, can be crucial," she says. "Your listening gives them a chance to clarify their thoughts and feelings."

While it's important to be a nurturing person who they can spill their guts to, Isaacs Kohl says it's also important to set clear, firm rules that the teens must follow. They may react negatively at first, but in the end, they'll respect you for it. These things may seem like they'll require lots of your time, patience – and food – but the benefits make it all worth it. Not only do you get to forge a closer relationship with your teen while allowing him some independence, you may just find yourself feeling younger again. Go ahead, let the teens chill at your spot.

Teen Hangout Traps

Keeping an eye on a teen is the reason many parents want to create "the spot" where teens gather. There are countless ways to make that happen, but there are certainly wrong ways to accomplish it. Here are a few hangout traps you should avoid:

Non-supervised Areas – According to author Erin Brown Conroy, having areas where Mom and Dad don't have access is a definite blunder. "It's not that you'll be supervising every second, but make sure supervision is adequate and the activities are plentiful, so teens don't have time on their hands that can spill into inappropriate activities," she says.

Drugs, Alcohol and Sex – Some parents feel smoking or having a couple of beers is OK for older teens. Unless you're looking forward to having parents – or the police – beating down your door, this is one idea you should nix. Allowing teens to smoke, drink or have sex may make you a favorite friend to teens, but it's highly unlikely their parents and the local authorities would agree.

Teen Again – Using slang may give you "cool points," but don't get too extreme with it. Teens can tell when you're trying too hard, and they'll probably think you're phony. "Don't try to be a teen again," Erika Karres, Ed.D., says. "Just be a friend to the teen – helpful, understanding and a role-model." It might seem boring, but ultimately, that's what will make you really seem cool.