

Tri-Town Council Corner, 2/10/12

Communication Matters

By Doreen Harris, Public Health Educator

Open communication between parent and child is crucial to children's development. Studies repeatedly show that parents are the most important influence in children's lives; not friends, phones, or Facebook – parents; and this is especially critical in the tween and teen years. Every generation has faced unique challenges to which parents must respond, but those faced today are marked by the explosion of information and media as never seen before. It seems like parents of past faced minimal competition to imparting information and values to children, relying on personal experience to guide kids through the turbulent waters of adolescence. Today's parents are pioneers muddling through an ever changing landscape of information overload, often feeling as if barely cruising at 20mph in a 65mph zone. Worse still, we often don't have the control of choosing what, where and when children will be exposed to delicate and confusing issues.

But here is where a little "old fashioned" goes a long way: talking; writing; spending time together. Stay proactive to keep the dialogue going, particularly as they grow! Strong relationships and open communication are paramount to ensure kids' health and welfare, especially as they enter the "tween" and teen years. Don't let technology take your place; here are a few quick tips that can yield big results, even in today's frenetic world of schedules, work, and school:

- Make your car a "phone free zone" and take advantage of this time to ask about your child's day – "Who did you sit with at lunch? Did you have a favorite class today?" (Try to not ask "yes or no" questions.)
- Kids, no matter how old, are often more apt to "open up" during pillow talk just before bedtime; as a parent, make time to use that opportunity to its fullest.
- Think of keeping a small note book – a private way for pre-teens/teens to "dialogue" in writing about anything they may not want to speak about. She can leave you a question, observation, or feeling; you respond in writing – no judgments or embarrassing talk to stumble over, but still keeping the lines of communication freely flowing.

For parents and guardians of girls in 5th or 6th grade, Tri-Town Council will again offer *Girl Talk*, an interactive program in which mothers (or another trusted woman) and girls in 5th or 6th grade explore the sensitive issues of adolescence. This four-part program in March encourages healthy, mutually respectful communication in a safe environment. Adults will learn to maintain open communication, so tweens feel comfortable relying on them for guidance as they move through puberty and adolescence. Registration for this program is limited and will begin soon; if your daughter is in 5th or 6th grade, watch for a backpack flyer or for info go to www.tritowncouncil.org.