

You're reading WHAT? Don't ban choices, expert says

By Heidi Stevens, *Chicago Tribune*, November 4, 2011

Q: Your teen is reading a book whose contents are offensive to your moral code. Should you forbid him from reading it?

Parent advice (from our panel of contributors):

"Absolutely not. In fact, I'd probably ask to read it too. I don't care what the minister said or Oprah said or the neighbor down the street said. I want to find out for myself what the book is about. And if I found it morally objectionable or was troubled my teen was reading such subject matter, I'd want to be able to talk about it with my teen sanely and productively. Banning a book or banning anything never has worked; desire is only whetted - just ask Adam and Eve." - Bill Daley

"I don't think I would ever forbid a book because the point of literature is to work it through on pages instead of in life. But I sure would sit right down and have a conversation about what he's finding on those pages and why he thought he would read it. I would hope that any book worth publishing is one that raises questions, and while the base material might be offensive I'd hope it would birth a level of thinking or gut response that would lead my kid to understand why I find it offensive." - Barbara Mahany

"Your teen is reading? Awesome. Forbidding a behavior for a teenager is very tricky turf, because unless you're sure you can enforce it 100 percent of the time, such a demand only serves to undercut your authority. And reading a book is pretty easy for your teen to do on the sly. But this is a golden opportunity for you to actually talk with your teen, with you outlining why you think the book is objectionable and making other literary recommendations. But I think you have to give your teen a chance to say what's compelling about the book and give him/her a chance to defend it. And then I say let him/her read it, with the idea of a thorough discussion between you two on the book's themes: 'So it's OK to date the undead behind your parent's back?'" - Denise Joyce

Advice from the expert:

Hold your nose and grab yourself a copy of the darn book, says Sarah Flowers, president of the Young Adult Library Services Association.

"The parent should read the book and discuss with their teenager why they found it morally objectionable and hear what the teen's response is," says Flowers, whose group works to ensure teens get access to high-quality library services. "If the parent doesn't freak out, the book is an opportunity to have an important discussion on somewhat neutral ground, since your teen isn't actually doing something morally objectionable — they're just reading about it."

You may also find, in reading it, that the book isn't what you feared.

"You might find out there are consequences in the book you weren't aware of or that your teenager actually agrees with you, despite what's happening in the book," she adds.

Books, more than TV shows or movies, Flowers argues, allow for many different interpretations, which can lead to the kind of thought-provoking conversations parents should be eager to have with their teens.

"Teenagers, developmentally, are exploring the world and trying to figure out who they are and where they belong and I think reading is a big part of that," she says. "I think discussing it respects the teenager's intelligence and allows for a more adult conversation about how they see the material and what they think it's all about."

You might also ask your librarian to recommend other books that cover similar subject matter so you can keep the discussion going, beyond one author's take.

Of course, you taking an interest in the topic might also knock it down a peg or two in the coolness category, which could work to your advantage.

"It kind of demystifies it," Flowers says, "and makes it a little more ordinary and not so much like a forbidden fruit."

Got a solution?

Find "The Parent 'Hood" page on Facebook, where you can post your parenting questions and offer tips and solutions for others to try.



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