

Supporting Officer Safety Through Family Wellness: **Discussing Your Job with Your Teen**

Teenagers of law enforcement families are sometimes faced with unique challenges, especially when it comes to navigating different views of the policing profession from their peers and social media. Below are suggestions for tackling potentially difficult conversations with your teenager about your career and tools you can both use to navigate these conversations.

What do you do at work?

When explaining your job, tailor your explanation to the knowledge and maturity level of the teen. Discuss what a typical day looks like, the tasks you enjoy doing in your position, and how it contributes to the profession and public safety. Encourage your teen to ask questions about your role and how it relates to their current perspective of law enforcement or what they might see on social media.

The community often sees law enforcement as the most readily accessible representative of the government. Explain to your teen how you work to engage with the community and how listening to the concerns of community members is crucial to building respectful relationships.

**"My job is to keep
the public safe."**

**"It's important
to work with
and listen to the
concerns of
our community."**

Why are you always gone?

Your teenager may exhibit frustration and other negative emotions when your schedule interferes with family commitments and other extra curricular activities. Be honest and keep an open line of communication.

If you're going to be late or miss an event you promised to attend, contact your teen if possible and explain why. Validate your teen's emotions and remind him or her it's okay to feel frustrated. When you can make an event, be present and show your emotional investment.



When opportunities are present to share your profession, such as a family day or a department open house, take advantage of it so your teen can develop a better understanding of your job. Share with your teen when you talk about him or her at work, when coworkers ask how your teen is doing, or when you see something on shift that reminds you of your teenager in a positive way. It is important to illustrate to your teen that he or she plays a role in not only your personal life but your work life as well.

Why don't you trust me?

Law enforcement parents may be hesitant when it comes to stretching the boundaries of freedom for their teenagers. Since officers are frequently exposed to risks and dangers in their community, it's natural for them to be protective of their own children.

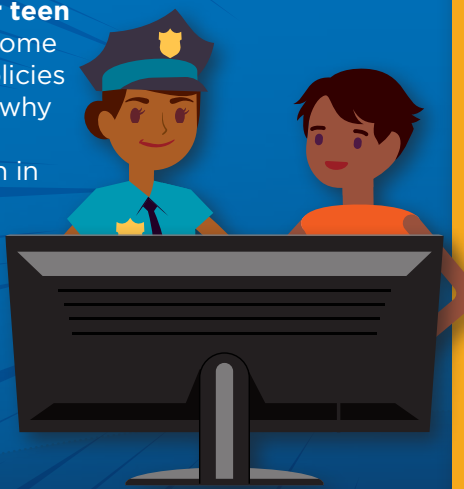
This may potentially lead to conflict and disagreements. Explain that, like other specialty professions, your role gives you a different context than other parents about safety. Just as you would have more knowledge about viruses as a doctor, being an officer means your professional experience can influence your parenting. Be transparent with your teenager and be proactive in providing your teenager with the skills needed to be safe when you are not present, giving you both peace of mind.



Navigating the Views of the Profession in the Media

Your teen will read and see opinions from their peers, the media, and organizations that paint the profession in a negative light. Work with your teen to understand these negative viewpoints and share tools to help your teen be mindful of the information he or she is consuming.

- Help your teen develop **critical thinking skills** to gather all the facts of an incident before forming an opinion.
- Explain there are **missing pieces to every story**. Often the community may not fully understand law enforcement policies and procedures. Similarly, your teen should continuously strive to understand how history and community opinions can influence the perceptions of their peers.
- **Make your teen aware** of some agency policies to explain why you might take action in a specific situation.



Is it my job to defend you?

Children of law enforcement grow up with a very different and personal perspective of law enforcement than their peers. Remind your teenager that it is **not their job** to defend the law enforcement profession or completely disclose your profession unless he or she wants to. Instead, encourage your teen to focus on your role within an agency such as investigations or traffic enforcement and highlight your work with the community.

If your teen is experiencing bullying or harassment because of coming from a law enforcement family, **make the school aware and encourage your teen to walk away** from the situation. If harassment continues, speak with the school about additional or administrative intervention.

If your child is faced with a difficult conversation with a peer, **discuss healthy conflict-resolution and communication skills** your teen can use.



Vicarious Trauma and Fear

Teenagers with access to social media and news stories may experience stress from seeing the extent of the risk officers face in the field every day. **Encourage discussion of their feelings and fears**. Find an outlet such as a sports team or school club for your teen to channel their attention towards or seek out someone your teen can speak with who is familiar with the challenges of law enforcement. Speak with your teen about proactive measure you take to stay safe on duty such as always wearing your vest and buckling your seatbelt in a patrol car.

For more information about the Institute for Community-Police Relations, please visit: <http://www.theiacp.org/ICPR>

This publication is one in a series.

For more family support resources please visit:

<http://www.theiacp.org/ICPRlawenforcementfamily>

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