

RAISING KIDS

# Your Kid Wants a Tattoo or Piercing? Don't Freak Out, Talk.

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For the first time ever, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) decided to review the incidence of youth tattoos and piercings in depth.

Led by Dr. David Levine, a general pediatrician and professor at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, and Dr. Cora Breuner, an adolescent medicine specialist at Seattle Children's Hospital, the new AAP report highlights the potential health risks and social/emotional consequences of tattooing and piercing in adolescents and young adults.

Tattoos and piercings are not new by any means, but studies show that more kids are getting them even at younger ages than in the past. According to the [Harris Poll](#) in 2015, about 30 percent of Americans have at least one tattoo, up from 20 percent just four years before.

Tattoos are especially popular among younger generations, with nearly half of all Millennials sporting one. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), about a quarter of 18 to 29-year-olds have piercings in locations other than their earlobe.

This may not be a big deal for some parents, especially those who have their own tattoos and creative piercings. But for some parents, it becomes an issue to add to the long list of parenting dilemmas. Permanent body art may not even be on their radar if nobody else in the family enjoys that form of expression or if their cultural or religious beliefs consider the practice taboo.

We have two choices: forbid our kids to get tattooed or pierced and risk that they do it anyway behind our back (and possibly get hurt or regret it), or initiate an open dialogue and work with our kids to guide them to the best decision possible.

### **Identifying why your child wants it**

The first step is to explore your kids' goals and motives for wanting a tattoo or piercing. This conversation can lead to a simple answer, like they just want to show off their artistic flare. Alternatively, the conversation could open the door to issues you were not aware of.

According to the Harris Poll, people typically get tattoos because it makes them feel: sexy (33 percent), attractive (32 percent), rebellious (27 percent), spiritual (20 percent), intelligent (13 percent), employable (10 percent), and healthy (9 percent).

If your daughter wants a tattoo at age 15 to feel sexier, then a red flag may go up. You could broaden your conversation to her reasons for wanting to attract more attention, her current sexual activity, and the feelings she has about her own body.

If your son wants a tattoo to feel tougher or more rebellious, you may want to explore his level of anger and aggression. Is he having trouble making friends in school? Has he displayed signs of bullying?

If your child wants to engrain the name of a significant other on their skin, you may need to talk to them about the level of commitment involved and the possibility of future heartbreak.

Finally, if they are doing it for spiritual reasons, what is the message they want to communicate, and why now? Should you be concerned about the influence a religious leader or spiritual mentor has on your child?

We need to take the time to listen to our children's reasons so that we can help guide them. The answer may be very simple and positive, like they want the word "peace" on their body because they wish for world peace. It's hard to argue with that.

### **Addressing your concerns**

Talk to your children about exactly what getting a tattoo or piercing involves. They may be so set on it that they haven't thought through some of the possible risks or downfalls.

For starters, the AAP report addresses the possible job market repercussions down the road. Some employers may frown upon visible tattoos in the workplace, which can limit your child's job prospects and success. In a 2014 survey of nearly 2,700 people, 76 percent thought that tattoos and/or piercings had hurt their chances of getting a job, and 39 percent thought employees with tattoos and/or piercings reflect poorly on their employers.

While your child may be many years away from getting their first job, it's important to talk to her about how a tattoo or piercing can impact her life in the future. Ask her to consider the risk involved, taking into account that life dreams should take precedence over a potentially rash, trendy decision in her teenage years.

Consider a compromise. Suggest that your child get a tattoo in a place that would not be visible on the job. Piercings are a bit more challenging. Clearly, a tongue ring could hinder one's speech, and other piercings on the face in particular may motivate an employer to choose another candidate.

Tattoos, more so than piercings, are pretty permanent. When you talk to your kids about getting a tattoo, be sure to bring up the fact that this commitment is not easily erased. Laser removal can also be costly – up to \$300 per square inch of treatment area – and may only be partially effective.

Plenty of people have admitted regrets that you should bring to your child's attention. According to a survey, nearly a quarter of people with tattoos say they regret getting them because they were too young, their personality changed, it no longer fits into their lifestyle, they chose someone's name with whom they no longer associate, it was poorly done, or it's simply not meaningful to them

anymore.

Perhaps most important, weigh the health risks associated with tattoos with your child before he goes ahead with it. The most serious complication from any form of body modification is infection.

Other health concerns related to tattoos include inflammation, abnormal tissue growth like keloid scars, and vasculitis, a rare inflammation of the blood vessels. Body piercings have also been associated with pain, bleeding, cysts, allergic reaction, and scarring. Tongue rings, meanwhile, can cause tooth chipping.

Once you've openly discussed the pros and cons, give your kids some time to ponder their decision. Ask them whether they feel it's really worth it, all things considered. How will the tattoo or piercing enhance their life? How will it hinder them? Are there alternative forms of expression they would be happy with, such as creative fashion choices or changing their hair color and style?

No matter their decision in the end, at least you sparked a mature conversation that will bolster their respect for you and remind them of your genuine, loving interest in their life. When something more serious comes about, they will know they can turn to you, which is, of course, more important and lasting than any tattoo or piercing.

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I don't have a tattoo or body piercing (aside from the ones on my ear lobes where I adorn my earrings). But I don't see them as taboos. In fact, I admire a tat which is done artistically and has a nice story behind it. As for my kids, neither has one yet. My 16-year-old son kinda asked me about it one time, so I told him what he needs to know before "feeling cool about it now and regretting it later". I can't stress enough on how this is a permanent mark on his skin. So, marking his skin with a girl's name or something that's "in" today could be a disaster later on. Health risks were part of the discussion too, plus a gazillion other concerns. I told him I'm not against the idea of him getting a tattoo. But after our little discussion, looks like I talked him out of it. For now. If he gets one someday, I'm glad he's armed with knowledge about it and not just a whim.

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