Tattoos and Piercings: How Old Is Old Enough?

More and more teens are getting body art—tattoos and piercings—to make a personal statement. And many are doing it themselves or getting help from amateurs. Should teens have to wait till 18—or get parental consent—to get tattooed and/or pierced?

Read these two arguments, then write your own opinion. By Sean McCollum

For Safety’s Sake, Body Art When Teens Want It

SOMEWHERE, IN SECRET, A 15-YEAR-OLD GUY IS dipping a safety pin in black ink and pricking little holes in his ankle in the shape of a question mark. This self-made tattoo is his statement about how he questions the world around him. If he’s careful or lucky—and afterward he swabs the wound daily with antiseptic cream—he might sidestep a pus-filled infection. Then again, maybe he won’t be lucky and he’ll end up with a nasty, question-mark-shaped scar for the rest of his days.

Tattoos and piercings are trends and ancient art forms in which people have expressed their identity. Many of the people teens admire—soldiers, rap artists, pop stars, sports heroes—have tattoos or

Common Sense Says Wait Till 18

“I WANTED TATTOOS FROM THE TIME I WAS 14,” Daniel Goldstein, now 19, told LC. “But I’m happy I didn’t get them then.” His tastes, he says, changed a good deal between his early teens and last year. But at 18, he had two palm-size religious tattoos penned onto his back at a professional studio. “The desire to get a tattoo is all well and good,” he says, “but if it’s something that you really want, then you’ll be able to wait. The decision needs to be able to stand the test of time.”

Because a tattoo really will stand the test of time. With the ink injected deep into the skin, tattoos are essentially permanent. (New laser technology makes it possible to remove tattoos, but the procedure costs $1,000+, not to mention the bullet-biting pain.) If kids aren’t absolutely certain they’re going to be Aqua Teen Hunger Force fans in 20 years, they probably shouldn’t get Master Shake, Frylock, and Meatwad tattooed onto their necks.

Teens also need to recognize that their bod-
eyebrow rings. Naturally, teens want to follow suit and leave their mark on the one thing they have some control over: their bodies.

So teens are going to get body art done—legally and safely or not. Of course they should go the legal and safe route.

If teens are blocked from getting the body art they want, they’ll often go shopping in the underground market. One survey showed that more than half of kids who get tattoos do so in grades 7-9. Most of the time, that means an amateur is punching holes in these kids’ tongues or poking some lame art into their backs. The body-art fakers care more about the money they pocket than they do about protecting the nerves in a young person’s mouth or keeping people free of hepatitis B or other diseases.

A pro studio that sterilizes its equipment with an autoclave and is careful about hygiene is the only way to go. “That’s why I think the state laws should be 16, to keep kids from doing [tattooing] themselves and going to underground dungeons and getting some disease,” Joe Kaplan, president of the Professional Tattoo Artist Guild, told The Cincinnati Enquirer.

But there’s more to making body art safe than just changing rules and laws. Friends and adults need to do a better job of listening to why someone wants to get tattooed or pierced in the first place. A lot of times, shouting, “You’re nuts!” just shuts down the discussion and sends the person looking for a back-door way to get it done.

If a young person is responsible and informed about body art, then he or she should be taken seriously—and should be able to get it done safely.

ites still have some major changes in store. That cute little kitty a girl gets inked into her abs at 16 might look more like a saber-toothed tiger when she gets pregnant 14 years later. These are all consequences people need to think through before they make a decision about tattoos.

And tattoos done by amateurs are bad news all the way around. Chances are they’ll look lousy, and they can leave a person sick and scarred. Experts view self-tattooing as a sign that someone needs help, just like teens who are cutting themselves. (If you or a friend is doing this, talk to an adult you trust to get the help you need.)

Unlike tattoos, piercings are not as permanent. For safety’s sake, a person should always go to a piercing pro, of course. But as a rule, a person can just pull out a stud or ring and the hole will close up on its own. Still, people getting pierced should be sure that they’re ready for the responsibility that comes with the metal. Do they have the discipline to follow the aftercare instructions that call for regular cleaning and disinfecting? If not, they’re in for a world of hurt.

So teens should wait till they’re 18 before making lasting changes to their bodies. If something is going to be permanent, it’s important to have it done right. Teens need to educate themselves about the process, get parental consent, and make sure it’s not something they’ll regret.

Your Turn! What advice would you give a friend about getting a tattoo or a piercing? Write the advice in the form of an e-mail.

Create a health-education campaign regarding tattooing and piercing aimed at teens. How would you get your message across?