

Set Limits For Your Teen, But Do It Constructively

by Mary Gossart

Young people not only need limits, they want them. They worry if limits aren't set. Truly.

Sure, they grumble, complain, and generally storm about the house amid cries of, "That's not fair! You're treating me like a baby! None of the other kids are treated like this!" To which a typical (and ineffective) parental response is often, "I don't care about the other kids. They're not my responsibility. You are!"

Sound familiar? It could even be an instant replay of your own teen-age years. Remember those standard lines you swore you'd never use if you became a parent? Comments like: "As long as you live in this house, you'll live by my rules." "So what if all the other kids get to stay out late. You're not the other kids." "I don't have to give you a reason. I said 'no'. That's all there is to it!"

Groan. More and more you find yourself using those very words you found so frustrating as a teen-ager. You're not trying to be mean or unreasonable. It's just that you're a parent, with years of life experience, 20-20 hindsight, and once-upon-a-time memories of being a teen-ager yourself. You trust your ability to anticipate potential problems. You want to protect your child. And if you're honest, you might admit that you fear losing whatever control you may have left over this soon-to-be-young adult.

You're worried, and rightfully so, about kids making grown-up decisions. You know all about teen-age pregnancies, children having children, sexually transmitted diseases, and now—the biggest fear—AIDS. So you feel somewhat justified retreating to the tactics your own folks used with you—the absolute rules enforced "for your own good."

At the same time, you know that strict prohibitions backfire. Rigid dictates, with no room for negotiation, often create rebellion in teen-agers. Parents can't realistically lock up kids. Sure, you can try to keep them from experimenting with sex by refusing to allow dating or by imposing strict curfews. Though well-intentioned, such attempts are frequently misguided and futile.

Consider this: No longer does teen sex commonly occur in the back seat of the Chevy...or on a "date." Research shows that teen-agers often engage in sex at home, after school, before Mom and/or Dad get home from work. It would seem more useful to agree on expectations for after-school activities: a routine of homework, chores, organized programs, sports, etc.

You could insist that no friends be in the house without an adult, at which your child may balk with an accusing, "I can't believe this! Don't you trust me?" One response to this might be something like, "I do trust you...and this isn't about trust. It's about wanting to help you avoid difficult situations that you may not know how to handle."

Whatever the limits, be open with your concerns and the basis for your decisions. A retort such as, "Because I'm your parent, that's why!" is not only ineffective, it also cultivates resentment and anger.

Far better to be frank: “I know that sexual urges and feelings can be so powerful that it’s easy to get ‘swept away.’ I think it’s important that we agree on some limits that will help you stay in control of your decisions.”

Help your teen-ager set reasonable limits for socializing with friends. Point out ways to reduce the potential for problems: parties must be chaperoned, no alcohol or drugs, dating only in groups, etc. Remember, when kids help create the rules, they’re more likely to comply. More importantly, they grow by learning from the process.

Parents want to minimize the chances of kids getting into situations they’re not ready to handle. Young people want to avoid that risk, too. Yet they often haven’t developed the skills to anticipate or negotiate those situations. So they’re relieved to have the limits, and grateful to use Mom and Dad as an excuse when they need one. Of course, they usually won’t admit to appreciating the boundaries, but that, too, is part of being a teen-ager—remember?

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