

Teens and Self-Control

Parenting Today's Teens

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Parenting teens is not just about caring for their physical and educational needs. It's also about training your teen to handle what life will later dish out, with body and soul intact. It's about teaching self-control.

After all, your child will spend 80% of his lifetime away from you. So, you need to ask yourself this question: "Am I willing to relinquish control to my teenager before he leaves home in order to help him learn how to act and become the one God desires him to be?"

Teens gradually need to get their feet wet in decision-making, since one day soon they will be fully in control of their own life and self-control will be paramount. Your main goal, then, should be about preparation for making good life decisions. It's more than teaching how to handle the finances, or how to pick the best classes, or driving responsibly. It's about training them to be godly men or women and developing their character.

"But," you say, "My teenager is too immature and irresponsible. He's not capable of handling much right now." You might be thinking that it would be better to wait until your teen begins to show some slightest signs of responsibility before you begin to trust him with more. But if you wait to see your child behaving responsibly, you may never hand over control. They may fail at first, and that's OK. They need to know that failure is a part of life. This begins the important process of teaching responsibility and maturity.

Independence, But With Limits!

There is one big mistake some parents make when they turn over control to their teen, and that's where problems can arise. Some parents go too far, too fast. They totally back off and don't set proper limits for their teenager. I see this happen most often in the life of a child whose parents divorce, who feel guilty for what they put their child through. Other parents just want to be friends with their children and they throw out their parental role. Children raised by such parents often become selfish, demanding, independent, and aggressively controlling as adults. Kids need their parents to be parents, not their "peerants."

It's been my experience that a teen wants limits, even though they may balk at them. We all live with limits, don't we? Clearly defined limits give a teenager security and direction, like being limited to driving on the right side of the road to avoid a crash. If you don't provide limits in which to frame their decisions, they will feel unprepared for their new freedom and become confused and frustrated. Limits you set should line up with the law, your closely held beliefs and your teen's maturity.

Once your teen demonstrates that he can handle the first baby steps of freedom, expand that freedom to a new level. Determine if the limits also need to be adjusted or kept the same. Teenagers will become impatient with the step-by-step process, and there may be a need to back up to a previous level of freedom if the limits are not adhered to, but this is a necessary process to move them on to maturity.

Teaching Self-Control

Your child needs to go through a process of learning self-control, which means to not be controlled by hormones, other things, or his peers. Here are some ways to begin the process of teaching your child self-control:

- A good place to start is with asking lots of questions. Ask your teen questions about moral issues, and wait for their answer without giving your opinion. "How do you think that person felt about being treated that way? What do you think would be the best thing to do in this situation? What would you do if you were asked to have sex, steal or take drugs? Tell me what you think about...? Allow your teen to come up with his own answer without injecting yours. Don't use it as an opportunity to lecture or teach. Let them realize the fullness of their answer by hearing their own words. Their answer will often be immature or even irresponsible, but that answer will echo in their mind and begin them thinking about the issue and how they would really act if that situation were to arise.
- Put limits around their decisions to cause them to be more responsible. Once you've given them more freedom, allow them to make their own decisions within that area of freedom, good or bad. For example, if you allow them use of the car and give them gas money, and if they instead spend the money on concert tickets, then they will have to figure out another way to get around. Don't just give

them more gas money. Let them walk, if necessary, to show the foolishness and reality of spending money unwisely. Once they have to walk, they'll never make that foolish decision again. Or, if they use the car outside of designated hours, they lose that privilege for a time.

- Set your boundaries, make them clear, and enforce them if they are broken. For example, if you see your teen watching an inappropriate movie, something that is out of bounds in your home, ask him – “Is this an appropriate movie for you to be watching?” Allow him the opportunity to respond as he should, by turning the movie off. Let him come to the right decision on his own. If his immaturity causes him to not respond as he should, then move in and make the decision to change the channel or turn the TV off yourself. Then reinforce the rule with consequences the next time the rule is broken, such as loss of the freedom to watch television for a time. If the rule is consistently broken, then remove the TV from the home altogether. It will be an inconvenience for you, but it shows your teen how passionately you feel about the issue of watching inappropriate material on television.
- Encourage your child in their good decisions, and point your comments toward their successes, not their failures. Don't say, “I told you so,” or, “I should have made that decision instead of you,” when they make a mistake. Instead, patiently allow them the opportunity to make the right choice and look for progress. Whenever you see your child respond with maturity and responsibility, congratulate them and explain that because they made a good choice you are now moving them up to a new level of freedom. Keep in mind that instant feedback is always best.
- Randomly offer examples of good decisions in your own life. While teens will respond to your own stories as examples out of the dark ages, revealing your own good decisions at key moments in your life will come back to them when they have the opportunity to make similar decisions. They will give the teen fuel and courage to make a similar decision in a similar situation. And they will also offer something to think about if the teen makes a different decision. Developing a portfolio of good decisions (both by you and others that the teen may admire) and injecting them in conversations randomly (not to make a point when the teen does something wrong) is a good way to teach your teen self-control by example.

My advice today for parents of teenagers is to begin to shift control to your child before you think they will need it. Give them the opportunity to show what they can handle asking them to do so, and don't bail them out or condemn them if they fail. Give them the chance to figure it out, learn from consequences, and find a better way for the next time they are faced with the same decision. Giving teenagers increasing levels of independence, coupled with proper limits and parental guidance, will begin to teach them the most important type of control, self-control.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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