

SETTING CURFEWS AND LIMITS

Spring break and prom season are right around the corner, so it's a good time to talk about setting limits with teenagers. And, summertime for juniors and seniors in high school is the perfect time to begin teaching teens how to set their own boundaries before they go off to college.

Some parents believe establishing curfews — with severe punishments if the curfews are broken — is a no-fail strategy to keep teens out of trouble. Give an inch, and kids will go a mile.

That may work in some families, but often I propose another way to teach teens to be responsible: make them a partner in rule-setting. Sound crazy? Give it some thought.

Getting Kids to Buy In

Boundaries obviously are important — you'd never tell a 16-year-old, "Just be quiet whenever you come in, because I'll be asleep." But *how* boundaries are set is crucial to getting teens to follow rules.

Typical teenagers are motivated to stay out of trouble because they respect their parents and fear disappointing them. Sure, consequences, such as being grounded or having a cell phone taken away, reinforce that message. But, eventually, when faced with a fun (but rule-breaking) opportunity, many teens choose to accept the consequences it will bring.

"This party is going to be awesome, and I don't care I'll lose my phone for a week," thinks a teen.

Parents typically respond by escalating the consequences: Instead of not being able to go out the following weekend, they decide the teen can't go out for the next three. And this often backfires, inspiring greater rebellion. Trust is broken more often and to larger degrees.

The key to it all is buy-in. Teens have to understand that they can earn more freedom by being responsible. Rewarding sensible behavior with small, incremental increases in privileges motivates most teens to stay in line. The message evolves from "We're the parents, and you'll do as we say," to "Earning my parents' trust means I get to do more."

While it may not feel like your teen is mature enough to set his or her own curfew, he or she certainly can be an active participant in working toward that privilege. One way this has worked with my clients is when parents set a baseline curfew and offer that the time be extended 30 minutes every six months when there is no curfew violation. Once the teen earns a curfew of midnight (perhaps in his junior or senior year), and there is no violation for six months, he has earned the privilege of setting his own curfew. And this sets the framework for sending him off to college.

In addition, many parents I've worked with have been pleasantly surprised to discover that their teens are more conservative when setting their own curfews.

Also, if the teen violates the curfew time he set for himself, then he has demonstrated he cannot yet handle this privilege and responsibility and a return to the midnight curfew resumes for six months.

Special Occasions, Sticky Situations

There are times when wiggle room should be afforded, such as for prom and graduation. In exchange for the privilege of having a later-than-normal curfew, you can add caveats, including having your teen call home for a quick check-in every couple of hours and every time he or she changes location.

But make it clear there's a firm curfew for regular weekdays and weekends. Calling 30 minutes before curfew to ask for an extension (because someone just popped a movie into the DVD player) can be a red flag that there's more going on.

Working together to set curfews is a great exercise, because it engages kids in thinking about their own values and teaches them why earning trust is important. This approach is applicable to many other areas, including borrowing a parent's car or determining how they can earn spending money.

When parents are consistent and clear in setting expectations and defining consequences for rule-breaking, teens learn what is appropriate and what is not. Rewarding them for behaving responsibly, by affording them input during boundary setting, goes a long way.

Finally, when they find themselves in a sticky situation that challenges the limits they agree to, but conflict with what their friends might be allowed to do, encourage them to use a truthful excuse, such as, "I can't — my parents won't let me." Their friends don't have to know they actually agree with the family rules.

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