

Setting Rules and Consequences with Teens



Rules and consequences become a critical piece of negotiating your way through the teen years. Both the rules and the consequences may change as your teen's needs [and desires] develop. It helps to ask yourself some questions about your rules periodically. General questions to ask include:

- Are they reasonable?
- Have the reasons for the rules been explained thoroughly?
- Are there too many rules?
- Are they enforceable?
- Has my teen been involved in making any of the rules?
- Are they consistent with other parents' [those whom you respect] rules?
- Whose needs are the rules designed to meet?

Depending on the answers to these questions and what you've decided is your bottom line, you may be able to negotiate a relaxation of these rules, as your teen is more able to make mature decisions. Or you may find that the rules are entirely unenforceable, meaning either that you need to make changes in your life in order to enforce them or you need to give them up. For example, you may decide that you should arrange your schedule to allow being home more of the time, or simply that you need to be more aware when you are at home. Remember, no matter how reasonable the rules are your teen's job is to challenge them. This means that you need to be prepared to impose consequences.

Consequences need to meet certain conditions in order to be effective. They should:

- Be related to the behavior so they make sense [being grounded for every infraction doesn't allow connection to a specific behavior, but if your teen damages someone else's property, part of the consequence might be to help pay for the damage].
- Teach your teen how to express feelings and desires in acceptable ways [you don't damage other people's property just because you're angry; anger can be expressed with words].
- Not be so severe or unenforceable that there is no hope of compliance [being grounded for six months will contribute to non-compliance].
- Be useful in changing behavior. They need to be unpleasant enough that your teen doesn't want to repeat the consequence. They should not include things that you want your child to learn to enjoy, like going to Grandma's for a weekend.
- Teach self-control [help your teen see the benefits of more freedom, less control, or something tangible like driving].

What kinds of consequences might be useful with your teen?

The answer to this varies, depending on your values and the personality, intensity, and interests of your teen. Sometimes he or she can help you find workable consequences. However, be careful because children will sometimes be harsher on themselves than you might think necessary. The goal is to prevent unacceptable behavior and teach your teen to make mature decisions. Think through consequences in advance and take time to manage your own anger or frustration before talking to your teen.