



Increasing Responsibility and Freedom in the Teen Years

Teens need their independence, but how do you make sure they are safe? It's tough to decide when to give your teen more freedom. Do you hang on to the kite string for as long as you possibly can, or give the kite free air? The decision isn't easy. One parent's decision for his or her teen may not be right for other parents and their teens.

Although every adolescent is different, there are many experiences common to the teenage years. The most common may be the pull and push between dependence and independence.

Teens, at younger and younger ages, are putting themselves at risk for sexually transmitted diseases—including AIDS—and for pregnancy. And some teens, and even younger children, smoke tobacco, drink alcohol, use other drugs, or commit acts of violence and other crimes. No wonder so many parents are concerned, even frightened; no wonder so many try to control the behavior of their teenage children.

It is important for parents to make rules for their young children. As children get older, however, they need to learn to make some of their own decisions and life choices. Teens need the chance to practice good decision-making skills, and to manage new life experiences. Parents need to give teens the freedom to do just that. But there is a catch: teens must be ready. They need to agree to behave in responsible ways and show that they can handle the freedom. They also need to keep their parents informed. That way, parents know when to lend guidance and supervision, and how to support their teen's progress.

That's where respect, responsibility and reliability come in.

Respect: Respect is a two-way street, but it starts with you. Give your teens the respect that you would like to be given. Give them credit for their knowledge and abilities; pay attention and listen to them. That means showing confidence in your teens, and being supportive.

The Challenge:

To help teens learn about the world and accept new challenges with the least amount of danger and harm. Parents must walk a fine line between controlling too much and being too relaxed about rules. When parents are too restrictive, they can push teens toward rebellion. When they are too permissive, teens may get out of control. It's a balancing act.

Responsibility: Teens are learning to take care of themselves as they prepare for adulthood. That's what growing up is all about. Give them an appropriate amount of freedom and independence. Encourage and promote responsibility and good decision-making, offering support and gentle help with difficult decisions. Let your teens know they can gain more freedom as they demonstrate increasingly responsible behavior.

Reliability: Part of growing up is learning and adapting to rules—rules about driving and work, rules about drinking and dating, social rules and family rules. Teens will test the rules, but over time most will make these rules part of their lives. This kind of reliability is worthy of recognition and praise. When you can rely on your teens behaving responsibly, it may be time to give them more freedom.

Parents should believe in their teens; set high standards for them, encourage them, expect them; to achieve their goals, and provide consistent love and support—including practical help—so they can achieve the promise that lies within them.

Source: US Department of Education