



# Boundaries

Being a part of your teenager's *development* is a time of joy and frustration. Teenagers may present as adult-like in their appearance and have grown up expectations, yet also display childlike emotions and behaviours. And for the young person, teenage years can be an emotional and difficult time. During this period it is important they know that you will *support* them get through it. One of the ways parents or caregivers can do this is by setting appropriate *rules* and *boundaries* for their teenager.

*"Jennifer started coming home late, well after curfew. We'd shout at each other and I'd get furious. It usually ended in tears and was destroying our relationship. Then I stopped arguing about it. I made it crystal clear that if she didn't come home on time, she'd be grounded the following weekend. It only took a couple of weekends moping at home for the rule to sink in. You just have to stick to it – and not take it personally."*

## **Boundaries are essential**

*Boundaries* are a signal to young people that they are cared for and are important. A lack of boundaries may be welcomed (as it means more freedom) but it can send a message that you don't really care.

Having boundaries with appropriate consequences teaches young people about responsibility. Facing the *consequences* of breaking rules and boundaries is important, as it helps them move away from being impulsive, develop self-control and make more adult decisions.

One of the difficulties with setting boundaries is knowing how much *freedom vs responsibility* is appropriate for that young person. Rules that are too tight and restrictive can lead to frustration and rebellion, whereas rules that are too loose mean young people have no guidance at all.

## **Establish clear rules**

Parents need to develop clear and concise family *rules* for their teenager. Organise a specific (and calm) time to discuss and agree on a *contract*. Your teenager may groan at the prospect of a '*family meeting*' however they will understand what it is and participate (as it is their chance to provide input).

### **Examples of rules:**

- No swearing at your parents
- Being home at curfew (or ringing for a lift if unable to make it home)
- No illegal substances in the house

### **Examples of consequences:**

- Grounded for the next weekend(s)
- Withhold allowance
- Remove cellphone / internet privileges

## **Be consistent**

To help teenagers make good decisions they need *consistency* from their parents. It is expected that young people will test boundaries and when they do, it is important to hold the line. No matter how well you set the boundaries they will mean nothing if you don't follow through with the agreed *consequences*.

If boundaries are tested, put in place the agreed consequences fairly. *Calmly* explain why their behaviour has resulted in these consequences. For them to *learn* to make good choices, they must be able to make bad ones AND feel the consequences when they do this. Make the problem *their problem*, not yours. Focusing on their behaviour, not their character, will help you achieve this.



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## Reinforce positive messages

Reassure your teenager that this is about the *behaviour*, not them. Reinforce the positive things that they have done. Notice when they do keep to the rules and *reward* them for it. Tell them you *love* them as often as you can, in both the good times and the tough times.

## Work as a team

Setting boundaries for teenagers is the first step to helping them set their own. Using a *collaborative* approach when making the rules/consequences will help to get greater *buy-in* from them. It is also important to be *flexible* and review the rules regularly as your teenager grows and shows maturity.

## Lead by example

All the advice in the world will count for little to a teenager if you don't walk the talk. Demonstrating acceptable behaviour is much more effective than talking about it. *Model* to your young person how to handle conflict, how to be honest, how to be kind, how to say sorry.

Teenagers will *respect* you if you are real and genuine, even when you make mistakes. So be prepared to be an imperfect parent, admit your mistakes and don't be afraid to say you're sorry.

## Boundary setting suggestions

1. *Start with support and love.* When setting rules, let your young person know you care about them and that this is about supporting their development and keeping them safe. Discussing the reason for the rules will help your teenager accept and understand them easier. 'I'm doing this because I love you and want the best for you...'
2. *Be clear about what you expect.* Young people need guidance. Rules should describe how you expect them to behave. Make 3 - 5 rules (no more) that are realistic and straightforward. Don't overcomplicate things. 'I have some rules I want you to follow...'
3. *Decide on appropriate consequences.* If rules are broken there needs to be consequences. You can also have rewards if they keep to the rules or do well. Use this as an opportunity to get feedback from your young person about what they think should happen. Although you will have the final decision, they may have better ideas than you so listen. 'So what should happen if you break the rules?'
4. *Write down the rules and keep to the contract.* Acknowledge your young person is free to make choices, 'You can choose to accept or reject these rules...' Recap with your young person what you expect from them. Be clear about what will happen if they choose to cross the line. 'Here's what will happen...'
5. *Follow through.* The most important step is following through with those consequences. Unless the young person faces the consequence at some point, the rules will be meaningless.

**TIP:** If you feel yourself getting wound up, walk away and continue the discussion when you are both in a calmer frame of mind.