

Setting Limits for Your Teen

by Kathleen McCoy, Ph.D.

Most teens claim not to want limits, but, deep down, they really do. Parents need to decide and agree upon the limits that are absolute - what they expect their teenager to do or not to do - and make these very clear to the teen, with an understanding of what the consequences will be if these limits are not respected. At the same time, teenagers need an increasing amount of autonomy and decision-making power.

Decide which issues are negotiable - and sit down and work out some compromises with your teen. For example, you may decide that she can choose her own hairstyle or clothes (and you won't nag her about these choices), but, at the same time, you absolutely require that she attend school, do her homework and be home by 9 o'clock weeknights and 11 o'clock on weekends. You may decide that she can date with certain restrictions - e.g., the boy must be her age or not more than a year older, no unsupervised parties, no car dates, etc. When she feels that she has some power to make choices in some areas of her life, she will be more likely to observe the limits you set.

Regarding friends you don't approve of: let your teen know that you have some reservations about some friends and tell them why, then invite them to tell you how they feel about these friends. Listen without interrupting or arguing.

In the absence of peer pressure to engage in dangerous or particularly undesirable behavior, it may be best to say little beyond this, to encourage more positive friendships and to let the questionable friendships unravel in their own time, as they probably will. (On the other hand, if you show continual, obvious distaste for a friend, the teen may cling even more tightly to that friendship.)

If you know, however, that a friend is pressuring your teen to drink, take drugs, steal, cut school or to engage in other serious risk-taking behavior, it's time to voice more than simple disapproval. You need to step in and limit, even forbid, the friendship. However, this should be only your last-ditch approach. Save this only for situations where you feel your teen is in definite danger. Don't dilute this friend veto-power with over-use.

Remember that teens have mixed feelings about limits that mirror their developmental position between childhood and adulthood: while they may balk at limits, argue with them and claim to have the maturity to make all of their own choices, they feel quietly reassured when parents step in and let them know what they expect of them. Deep down, most teenagers see limits as reassuring, as a sign of ongoing parental protection, and as proof that their parents really care.