

Tips for Parents

Tips for Parents with Troubled Teens We offer the following suggestions for families who need to tighten up their family rules and structure.

Setting Better Limits Limits and rules are necessary to create order and productivity, the lack of which creates chaos and confusion. Rules provide the basis of understanding for what is expected, whether in the workplace, class-room, community or family. If a classroom had no rules, very little learning would occur. If a community operated without rules it would cease to be a safe place to live. Likewise, if harmony is to be maintained within the family, there must be a proper set of family rules, understandings or expectations that are based on your family values. If your teen is usually compliant and responsible you will probably only need to have a few rules. However, if you are dealing with a difficult or defiant teen you are already familiar with the need for more defined structure.

When setting rules, you want to identify some basic core rules and then support the core rules by establishing several small preventative rules.

For example:

If you have a core rule of "Don't use drugs" then you will want to set some preventative rules such as who your teen may associate with, what types of activities are allowed, where your teen is allowed to go, and when your teen may go, as well as when he or she is expected to return. It would be foolish to think your teen could hang out at the wrong places or associate with drug-using friends and remain drug free.

If you want your teen to maintain good grades, you may need to have some clear preventative rules in areas such as: school attendance, completing daily homework, and obtaining weekly progress reports. The key is that rather than waiting until the end of the semester to see if your teen receives good grades, you set rules and create a structure that will help your teen along the way; and maximize their chances for success.

When you create preventative rules along with your main core rules, it provides your teen with the greatest amount of protection. It also allows you to be involved so that you can be aware of problems early and resolve them, before they become overwhelming.

Conflict is inevitable with difficult or defiant teens. Consistently addressing and resolving conflicts over small issues such as homework, dress, grooming and curfew, is your best preventative measure to avoid the large, devastating issues such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse and failing grades. "Take care of the small things, and the big things will take care of themselves," really applies when it comes to administrating rules.

Compliance Once you have an established set of rules, compliance with those rules depends on four things:

- The rules are clearly understood.
- The rules are monitored.
- The rules are consistently enforced.

- The consequences used are effective deterrents.

If any of these four things are not in place it will drastically affect the compliance with the rules. With this in mind, let us address each area.

Clearly Understanding the Rules

If your rules are not clearly understood, it leaves a lot of room for misunderstandings, conflicts and even manipulations. Many times parents assume that their teen understands the rules the same way they are intended.

For example:

If you tell you're teen to be home early, their interpretation of "early", and yours, may be drastically different. If you tell you're teen to clean their room, their idea of a "clean room" and yours may be miles apart. For these reasons, rules need to be very specific. To avoid misunderstanding, it is a good policy to have your teen write down or repeat back their understanding of any rule or expectation.

Monitoring

Monitoring is essential in the administration of any rules. Imagine for instance, what if our high-ways were not monitored by law enforcement? What if a business did not monitor production and quality? As parents, we must provide a safety net for our children by monitoring their behavior. How much we have to monitor depends on how much monitoring is needed. Some teens require very little monitoring; difficult teens require intensive monitoring. Let your teen know that you will be monitoring their behavior. This will do a couple of things; first, they will not be offended if, or when, they discover you are monitoring, and second, if they know they are going to be monitored, it tends to give them added incentive to follow the rules.

Monitoring may occur in many ways. For instance, in regard to academics, most schools will assist you in providing daily or weekly reports, or you may choose to occasionally drop into your child's classroom and talk to their teacher. Random drug tests can assure compliance with sobriety. Use of a vehicle may be monitored through odometer checks. As a means of "cross-checking" such things as activities or curfews you can communicate with the parents of your teen's friends, or even drive by to assure they are where they said they were going to be.

Consistency

The hardest, yet most important thing a parent can do is to be consistent. A rule, or understanding, that is not enforced can be the same as having no rule at all, and can undermine the well being of a family. In order for our teens to feel safe, they need to know they can count on us to be consistent and dependable. If a violation occurs, we need to consistently enforce the previously established consequence. A difficult teen will test the boundaries to see what their limits will truly be. That is why consistency is so critical.

Letting small things slide until they become large things will create chaos, confusion and resentment. While most of us do this from time to time, it is a very ineffective approach. Consistency is the key. Follow through on what you said you would do. Sporadic enforcement does not work. Only those parents who consistently enforce their rules will have their rules consistently followed.

Consequences

Consequences will vary depending on the violation as well as the teen's response to the consequence. Some teens may respond to the loss of the privilege of going out on Friday night, while others may not be bothered by it at all.

The key is: To use consequences that have significant meaning and/or deterrent value to your teen, and the severity of the consequences should match the severity of the violation.

Research has shown that immediate consequences are the most effective. However, some behaviors are so severe that an immediate consequence would not be strong enough by itself. That is why a combination of immediate consequences with some follow-up consequences is often needed.

Immediate consequences might include such things as writing essays, time-out, room restriction, or a work project. Immediate consequences refer to those consequences done immediately and on the spot, before the teen can resume any of their normal activities.

Follow-up consequences are those applied over a period of time such as loss of driving privileges, book reports, a major work project, being grounded, additional household chores, or loss of a planned upcoming activity. Again, follow-up consequences are sometimes needed to provide an additional deterrent.

Effective Deterrents

The consequences you use must be strong enough to be effective deterrents. Otherwise, not only will consequences be ineffective, they will most likely be ignored. Some teens will not respond, no matter what consequences are used. Other teens defiantly refuse to comply with their consequences. In either of these situations, the family/house rules become inoperable. Parents are left with little recourse other than getting outside help.