



Taming the Beast: Effective Limit-Setting Strategies With Teenagers

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Thank you for joining us for this discussion of limit-setting with adolescent children and the challenges of parenting teenagers. We'll be covering a number of the points below during the presentation and we welcome your participation—feel free to share your own thoughts about the information presented and to ask any questions about the items listed below, or other related issues.

- Why can discipline with a teenage child be more complicated than a younger child?**
 - It's appropriate for adolescents to begin to separate from their parents but sometimes this can take the form of increased defiance and disrespect.
 - During this time of separating from parents, it is common for parents and teenagers to be in conflict regarding the speed at which increased privileges and responsibilities are granted by parents.
 - It's at this point in time that kids begin to develop the ability to think about things *abstractly* and, often, this contributes to a tendency to argue repeatedly over the "principle" of a given rule or expectation.
 - Another development event occurring at this point in time is the growth of a moral sensibility, which often leads at this time to a greater wish for kids to decide, for themselves, what is right and wrong, rather than simply complying with external rules. In some ways, this is a very healthy and positive development. However, this developmental event can also contribute to an increase in parent-teenager conflict.
 - Teenagers are increasingly identifying with their peer group, rather than the family, and they may orient themselves towards a lifestyle or behavioral pattern which is endorsed by the peer group, which is in conflict with the family's norms.
 - Adolescence is characterized by some degree of normal moodiness and this volatility can add to the degree of conflict between parents and teenagers.
 - Parents have real—and legitimate—fears regarding their kids' safety. Teenagers, on the other hand, are famous for their sense of invulnerability, leading parents to be cautious and worried for their kids' basic safety. Often, these conflicting views of risk contribute to tension between parents and their adolescent children.
 - Parents' expectations and approach to the job of being a mom or dad is often shaped by the most powerful role model in their own lives: their own parents. The task of parenting a teenager can be complicated by having a poor role model or by rigid adherence to how your own parents went about the task of raising children.
 - Conflicts between you and your spouse, regarding expectations, limits and consequences, can significantly add to the stress.
 - At one time, it was believed by some mental health providers that some parents achieved vicarious satisfaction through their children's acting-out. Certainly this is not often the case. But...are you sure that you are not giving your children mixed messages regarding how to be popular or the normalcy of "sowing one's wild oats" during high school years?
 - Blended families, which are much more common than in years past, add a new level of complexity to the task of raising teenagers.

- Adolescence itself is a longer period of development than was once the case, which can add to frustration on the part of both parents and kids.
- **Tips for parents**
 - Everything goes better if you can establish and sustain a working level of communication with your teenager.
 - Be mindful of the longer term goal: to help your teenager leave you and return, later, as a fellow adult. Your job is to safely guide your teenager into late adolescence/early adulthood and to have faith that he/she will return as a fellow adult.
 - Avoid power struggles, pick your battles, sort out what's really important and be prepared to let natural consequences shape your kids' behavior, if necessary.
 - Be mindful of, and have confidence in, fundamental principals of learning:
 - Carrots always work better than sticks.
 - Understand the concept of rewarding "successive approximations" of the desired behavior and be prepared to reward, even for small displays of positive behaviors.
 - Figure out what rewards at your disposal are salient to your kid and don't overlook the power of praise and recognition of accomplishments.
 - Consistency in the application of carrots & sticks is essential. Among other things, this means:
 - ◆ Pick consequences *you* can live with. You undercut your own authority if you fail to impose consequences you've set. Don't threaten or bluff with extreme punishments.
 - ◆ Ensure that you and your spouse are consistent in the application of rules.
 - ◆ Hold yourself accountable not to overreact or look the other way.
 - Expect that you will have to adjust your privileges and expectations as your teenager advances through adolescence and, often, it is important to the teenager that he/she enjoy some different freedoms and responsibilities than younger sibs.
 - With respect to your system of rules, expectations and consequences:
 - Model your approach after the criminal justice system of our larger society:
 - ◆ Rules must be clear in advance. While "ignorance of the law" is a poor defense, make sure that you've communicated expectations (family contracts may be useful for this reason, in some circumstances).
 - ◆ Just as occurs in the real world, there should be a temporal separation (e.g., gap in time) from the point of interrupting a behavior (e.g., the "arrest") and the dispensing of a consequence (e.g., "sentencing"). Avoid issuing a consequence in the heat of the moment.
 - ◆ During this gap between "arrest" and "sentencing", it's best for parents to work jointly and to clearly indicate to the teenager that decisions are arrived-at collaboratively by mom and dad. Keep your deliberations private, however.
 - ◆ Be matter-of-fact and businesslike when dealing with issues of controlling behavior and limit-setting, following the example of law enforcement and jurisprudence.
 - ◆ The best consequences have some logical connection to the offense—this is not always possible, but use this concept when applicable (e.g., punishing curfew violations by penalizing future time out of the house).
 - ◆ Use small consequences—never squander your "big gun" (whatever that may be). There always must something "worse" if your teenager refuses to comply with a given set of consequences.
 - Use of a family contract: pro's & con's. Feel free to contact Dr. Jochem at jjochem@aol.com for a copy his family contract.

Dr. John Jochem is a clinical psychologist with many years experience working with adults, adolescents, couples and families. Should you have any questions about this presentation, or wish to learn more about the range of services available through Dr. Jochem's practice, Hawthorn Counseling Group, feel free to call Dr. Jochem at (847) 680-0755 or contact him via email at jjochem@aol.com .