

Positive Parenting: High School Age and Beyond - Pick your Spot

It is important to know your limits and stick to them. Typically, your teen will push those limits in predictable ways in routine situations and with increasing frequency. They will also find ways to challenge you in ways you could never have predicted.

Know that your teen still needs limits to maintain their safety. Remember their decision-making skills are not fully developed and so they are still impulsive. In addition, they really do want and need limits set as they experience the internal conflict of dependence versus their emerging independence.

Before you get into one of those situations, know what your limit is going to be. The first step is to identify what is important to you – what are your values? You may want to include your teen in this conversation. Is it more important to you that your house be clean or that you have more family time? Is it more important that your high school student has an after-school job or concentrates on getting good grades? Once you have thought about what is more important to you in a particular situation, you'll be clear on what your next steps are.

Then, ask yourself what are your boundaries or limits? What behavior matters most to you and what expectations are age appropriate?

We're not thinking about situations where you will establish consequences for your teen or young adult misbehaving. Here we are focusing on you, as a parent, remaining firm and consistent in maintaining an established limit. If you are going to set a limit for the amount of time your teen can spend on social media, you need to be ready to consistently enforce that limit. For your teen to honor those limits, you, and your partner, spouse or other caregiver have to deliver the same message and may well have to abide by the same rules.

Teens are in control of their social lives. Are you going to allow your high school student to attend a party in a house where no adult is present, especially if you don't know the family involved? When your child announces that they are going to sleep over with a friend you don't know, are you ok with that, or not? Is it alright if your child drinks alcohol in those situations or is that something you will not tolerate? You need to figure out how these situations line up with your family's boundaries and identify your position ahead of time. It may take some effort to make sure that you are being consistent. You need to have "ground-rules" that you are able to enforce consistently. These ground-rules are the important boundaries that you have drawn for your family and that everyone understands and is expected to follow. You need to make clear to your teen why you have set certain ground rules, whether the rule is based on your values or simply because you are the adult.

There will be times when your young adult throws you a curve ball. It's possible that your initial response won't be consistent with your boundaries. After the fact, but before the situation arises again, you need to communicate clearly that what you allowed the first time will not be allowed again and why. Be prepared to tell your child that you made a mistake and that, after

further reflection, you will have a different response in the future. Remember, admitting that you have made a mistake is always effective parenting – you are modelling accountability and informing your child that no-one is perfect and that is always room for improvement.

Know what you are going to say. If you are going to say yes, say "yes" the first time they ask. If you're going to say no, say no and stick to it. Don't let them learn that you can be worn down into permitting a forbidden behavior.

It would not be hard to spend all of your time and energy battling with your children, but it would not be advisable or effective. Pick your battles. Your teen should know what the ground rules are and the rationale for them. Be consistent in what you say and in the rules that you set. The battles you pick should matter to you, reflecting your values. And model: model appropriate behavior, model the behavior you want to see from your child. Show them the behavior that you expect to see from them whether that be words, actions or anything else you'd like to see them do. If you want them to discuss something respectfully with you, you need to treat them with respect first.

Remember too that as your teen grows into an adult, you will have to give them more responsibility, negotiate some issues, and create safe opportunities for them to learn from their mistakes. With a high school student, picking your spot is both more difficult and more important. The boundaries you are enforcing are going to be more contentious and the push-back may be explosive.

Pause here and start to think about what battles really matter to you. Your goal is not to resolve with absolute certainty what those battles are. Go back later after you've made a preliminary list and talk about the list with your spouse or partner. Try to get on the same page so that your responses are consistent. Don't start off too ambitiously; better to pick just something relatively easy to be consistent about to build your muscle for holding firm.

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