

Health & Parenting

Curb Your Teen's Bad Behavior with Discipline that Works

Bad behavior doesn't end when your child graduates from diapers -- or even from middle school. In fact, the teen years can bring some of the toughest discipline challenges parents have to face.

Sulking, arguing, lying, and rebelling are just a few of the ways teens^[1] misbehave. There's a good explanation for these bad behaviors. As teens become more independent, they still lack the emotional maturity they need to make informed, thoughtful decisions. The parts of the brain^[2] that control decision making and impulse control haven't fully developed. The combination of autonomy and immaturity can lead to risky teen behaviors, like drinking, smoking^[3], and having unprotected sex.

You want your children to do the right things, but disciplining teens isn't easy. When they talk back, you can't just put them in a time-out like you did when they were toddlers^[4]. Effective parenting of teens requires a few adjustments to your discipline strategies.

Smarter, Stronger Discipline Strategies

The goal of effective discipline is to gain more control over your kids -- without being too controlling.

Set clear rules. Tweens and teens push boundaries to see how their parents will respond. It's important to establish clear rules, and to have consequences for breaking those rules. For example, the punishment for breaking curfew might be that your teen has to stay home the next weekend.

You'll get less resistance if you involve your kids in designing their own consequences. Just don't forget that you still have the final say.

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Put it in writing. So that there can be no misunderstandings, create a formal list of house rules, or type up a behavior contract that you and your teen sign. Post the list or contract on the fridge or in another central location where your kids won't be able to miss it.

Examples of clear rules include: "Curfew is 8 p.m. on weekdays, 10 p.m. on weekends, and no going out until homework is finished." Anyone who breaks one of these rules loses television for a day. If your kids do break one of the rules, all you have to do is point to the list.

Be firm -- and consistent. Teens are master negotiators and manipulators. They're adept at spotting any sign of parental weakness. When you waffle and give in to their pleas for leniency, they are going to expect the same response every time they misbehave or break a rule.

Being consistent about teen discipline also means that both parents need to be on the same page. If one parent always says "yes" and the other always says "no," your teen is going to know exactly which parent to ask.

While you're being firm, don't forget to also be fair and understanding. A little empathy goes a long way when disciplining teens.

1. <http://children.webmd.com/tc/growth-and-development-ages-15-to-18-years-promoting-healthy-growth-and-development>
2. <http://www.webmd.com/brain/picture-of-the-brain>
3. <http://www.webmd.com/smoking-cessation/default.htm>
4. <http://children.webmd.com/tc/growth-and-development-ages-12-to-24-months-overview>