

Loosening the Reins When Children Become Teens and Young Adults

When children move into their teens and early adulthood, many parents struggle to find the appropriate level of letting go. How much freedom should you allow? How much privacy is reasonable? And what responsibilities should you expect your children to take? Here is guidance from Marti:

I. Underlying issues

- Many parents today tend to overprotect and do too much for their children, often failing to prepare them gradually for the freedom and responsibility of adult life.
- Privileges come with responsibilities at any age; if we forget that, we risk raising children with a sense of entitlement.
- Especially when kids have been away at college and then return for the summer, they may chafe at the idea of having parents set limits. But if they are living under your roof, you have a right to have rules and expectations.

II. Tips for parents

- Base freedom on skills and behavior more than age
Starting even before adolescence, pay attention to how your child handles household tasks, emergencies, peer pressure and other challenging situations. Help your child build and practice the skills he or she will need for greater independence. At any age, focus on how trustworthy your child is about following rules and expectations and treating you and others with respect. Freedom is a privilege granted to responsible, respectful, trustworthy children.
- Engage your teen or young adult in setting house rules and expectations
Discuss together what is reasonable in terms of curfew, entertaining friends at the house, conditions for using the car, alcohol use, etc. Be clear about expectations for contributions to household work and the cost of food, gas and other expenses. By allowing your teen or young adult child to help generate these rules and expectations, you recognize his or her growing ability to make good decisions and you give him or her a chance to think carefully about how people can live together respectfully and cooperatively. These are important life lessons!
- Respect the privacy of your older teen or young adult child
It often is difficult for parents to accept that they do not have a right to know everything about their older teen or adult child's life. But as long as the adult child is meeting the expectations you have set – and as long as you see no signs of serious problems that would warrant intervention (e.g. substance use or other dangerous behavior or mental health problems) – you are wise to let your child take the lead on how much to share of his or her personal life. Be warm, available and ready to listen when your child needs a sensitive ear and you will pave the way to close, trusting adult relationships in years to come.

- Set regular check-ins about what is working and what isn't
This can be fun and informal – going for a walk together or sitting down over a favorite treat. Express appreciation for the contributions, healthy choices and responsible behavior you see in your child. Listen to how he or she feels about the rules and expectations and be open to making small changes if appropriate. Or provide more guidance or practice if there are skills your child needs to strengthen. Remember that your job as a parent is to put yourself out of a job, preparing your child for happy, healthy, competent adult living.

Marti Erickson, Ph.D.

Owner & Co-host, Mom Enough®

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