Discipline during the teen years

Teens often struggle for independence and challenge their parents' authority as they transition between childhood and adulthood. This can result in displays of attitude, rebellion and angst—all of which are normal. While teens want independence and often resent parental rules, they are also leery of the responsibility and consequences of taking care of themselves. At this time, parents need to help their teen make the transition from parental discipline to self-discipline.



The Changing Parental Role

As teens develop into young adults, we as parents are also experiencing fundamental changes. It may feel a little sad to realize our children don't need us like they once did; as we lose this connection with our kids, our role changes from one of protector and teacher to one of guide.

Rather than focusing solely on discipline, parents of teens must help their kids develop the ability to make good decisions for themselves. Since teens lack experience, they must learn to think before they act. The trick for parents is learning when and how to let go.

Parenting Teens

Some essentials for parenting teens include:

- **Maintaining self-control.** Out-of-control teens don't need out-of-control parents.
- **Listening.** Really listening and trying to understand can ease your teen's anger or frustration.
- **Biting your tongue.** Don't lecture or preach.
- **Stepping aside.** Let your teen experience consequences as long as they don't involve real danger. Guide, don't rescue.
- **Choosing your battles carefully.**
- **Sticking to one issue at a time.**
- **Focusing on your teen's behaviour**, not on them as a person.
- **Always providing unconditional love.** Tell or show your teen that you care, this is essential in helping your teenager believe in him or herself.

Set Limits

Child psychologists and experts agree that even though teens are on the verge of adulthood, they need and want ground rules. Teens face difficult decisions, some of which can have life-or-death consequences, such as drinking and driving, taking drugs or having sex.

By setting limits, you can help your teen through this challenging time. To be successful and avoid conflict, involve your teen in establishing the limits. It is important for teens to have a voice and know that their opinion matters.

Consider a Behaviour Contract

A behaviour contract is a written contract in which you and your teen negotiate behaviour, limits and/or responsibilities. By allowing your teen to participate in the process of developing such a contract, you show respect for their opinion and help them learn about making decisions on their own. The contract should include basic and important rules regarding safety, as well as specific consequences.

Behaviour contracts can:

- Help teens and parents focus on a goal rather than on emotions.
- Allow teens to feel that they have some say, reducing the power struggle between parent and child.
- Prevent misunderstandings and procrastination.
- Provide parents and teens with a sense of accomplishment.
- Encourage mutual respect by expecting both parties to honour the terms of the contract.

Contracts should be created and finalized by mutual agreement, not coercion. They should be specific, leaving no room for conflict or disagreement, and should contain rewards and/or consequences. Try to abide by the contract for a trial period, such as a month, and then decide if it’s working or if it needs to be renegotiated.

Embracing a New Relationship with Your Young Adult

Try to maintain a relationship of mutual respect and love as you practice guidance through discipline. Your role as a parent of teens is to provide encouragement and support, not interference.

It can be difficult to accept that your child is becoming an adult who needs to make decisions on their own. Be sure you don't lose your sense of humour, and try to enjoy the new and exciting young adult that your child is becoming.