

**Prepared for:**

**South Brunswick Public Schools  
EPIC Program**



# **Common Discipline Problems Of Teenagers And How to Solve Them**

**One of a series of Parent Guides from**



## **Parent Guide**

# **Common Discipline Problems Of Teenagers**

And How to Solve Them

The Parent Institute  
P.O. Box 7474  
Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474  
1-800-756-5525  
[www.parent-institute.com](http://www.parent-institute.com)

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## Introduction

*Congratulations, Mom and Dad—you've survived temper tantrums, pacifiers, playdates, preteen angst and crying meltdowns! What's next? Driver's licenses, part-time jobs, weekend parties, teenage angst and crying meltdowns. (Some things never change.) In other words, you've got a teenager.*

*And like no other time, the teenage years are about your child growing up and slowly moving into adulthood. During these years, he'll\* learn more about who he is and what he'll become than ever before. Your job, as always, is to guide him on that journey. What's different now, though, is that you'll be sharing the driver's seat.*

*Not that share means relinquish. You're still the parent, after all, and yours is still the final say. But you will likely find yourself compromising more, finessing your approach to discipline, and marveling at the fact that your baby has somehow morphed into a young man before your eyes.*

*But graduation isn't here yet, and your child still looks to you for love and guidance. To make his teenage years as smooth and enjoyable as possible, try the ideas in this Parent Guide for handling some of the most common teenage discipline issues.*

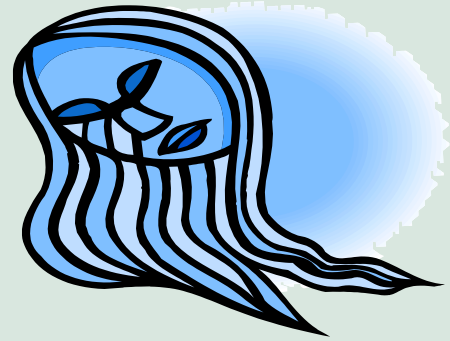
*\*Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*



## Five Unwavering Truths About Discipline

1. Discipline means “to teach”—it does not mean “to punish.” Accordingly, it should be done out of love.
2. Consistency is key. No matter what approach you take to discipline, it's crucial to be consistent about it. In other words, this morning's rules should also apply this afternoon.
3. Be patient. No discipline strategy works all the time—but that doesn't mean the strategy isn't working overall.
4. Children need and want limits. Effective discipline doesn't stifle kids—it gives them a strong, dependable foundation from which to grow and mature.
5. Discipline isn't just about correcting what your child does wrong—it's about celebrating what he does right. The more you praise and reinforce the good things he does, the more he'll want to do the right things.

## Discipline Dilemma #1: Moodiness



**Smart Solution:** What's that big, sullen lump in your teen's bed? Why, it's your teen! It may be close to noon where you're standing, but it's the crack of dawn in her corner of the universe. And if she's like a lot of teens, she's not exactly going to be a ray of sunshine when she gets up.

Like you, teens are subject to moodiness. Unlike you, however, they probably spend a bit more time indulging (and "forcibly sharing") their various emotional zigs and zags. And while your child doesn't have the right to hold you hostage to her moods, she does have the right to express them—within reason.

To weather your teen's stormy periods, try these suggestions:

- Don't force cheerfulness down her throat. If she needs to skulk around at her own speed in the morning, let her. And, please, no rousing choruses of "If You're Happy and You Know It, Clap our Hands" from you.
- Watch for signs of depression. If she suddenly disengages from friends or gives up favorite activities, she could be depressed. If you suspect this is the case, you must step in (see "Where to Go for Help," page 8).
- Don't be a doormat. If your teen's moodiness comes complete with insults or foul language, lay-down the law. Remind her that she's welcome to feel whatever she wishes—and to express those feelings in her room, by herself.

## Discipline Dilemma #2: Independence

**Smart Solution:** It's hard to convince your teen that he's still a child who needs your guidance—especially when you have to stand on a chair to look him in the eye. But need you he does, all six-feet-two of him. What he also needs, however, is independence.

And he should. By his sophomore or junior year of high school, he'll probably be driving, have a wider group of friends, and may even hold down a part-time job. He *does* need more freedom, and it's your job to give it to him—within limits.

To strike a balance between his desire to explore the world and your desire to keep him safe in it, try these ideas:

- If he wants to hang out at the mall with friends, let him (assuming he hasn't abused the privilege before). Just ask a few questions first: Find out who he'll be with, where he'll be going, and when he'll return. Also, be sure to set a reasonable curfew (and enforce a consequence if it's broken).
- Don't force him to attend every family outing. As your teen gets older, it's normal for him to detach a bit. When possible, give him some leeway to pass on certain events.
- If his choices in clothing and music make you cringe, keep it to yourself. Assuming he's not wearing (or blaring) anything offensive, just let it go. Smile, give him a hug, then quickly swallow another aspirin. On the other hand, if it's something that goes against your values, put your foot down.

### Discipline Dilemma #3: Part-Time Priority Problems

**Smart Solution:** Although you may fantasize about one day being “mother of the president,” chances are you’ll first be “mother of the girl who waits tables down at the sub shop.” Which is a good thing. Part-time jobs are fantastic for teaching kids responsibility, teamwork and the true cost of living (watch as she recoils in horror when she sees the difference between gross and net pay).

But it’s important for you to determine whether or not your child is ready to become someone’s employee. Is she doing well at school, or is she struggling in several subjects? Will her many extracurricular activities make a part-time job impossible? Is she mature enough to handle the additional responsibility?

If all systems are go, let her start filling out those applications. When you do, though, keep these tips in mind to avoid job-related problems:



- Be sure she figures out how she’ll get to and from work. If she drives, will the family car be available when she needs it? If she walks, what will she do if it’s dark when her shift is over? Will you have to pick her up? Can she get a ride or an escort home?
- Don’t nag her while she looks for jobs. If she asks for help, feel free to circle a few classifieds. If she doesn’t, lay low. Turning this into your quest just opens the doors to power struggles and perceived slights.



- Don’t intervene with her boss. Unless there’s an incredibly serious situation—such as sexual harassment or intimidation—going on at work, let your child figure out how to handle things within the chain of command. Give her the opportunity to solve her own problems with scheduling conflicts, rude customers, or lazy or dishonest coworkers, and try to stay neutral.

• Be clear with your child about how she will be allowed to spend the money she makes at her job. Will you require her to set some of it aside in a savings account? If there are things you don’t want her wearing or having, make it clear that they’re still unacceptable even if she uses her own money.



## Discipline Dilemma #4: Driving Issues

**Smart Solution:** Remember the endless hours your little boy spent lying on the living room floor, happily *vuvrooom-vuvroooming* his toy cars? Guess what? He's still fixated on them, only now his vehicle of choice has gotten bigger. That's right—he wants the car. Namely, your car. And while turning 16 doesn't mean he can drive whenever and wherever he wishes, it is reasonable for him to borrow your wheels now and then.

Still, there are limits. Driving is an enormous responsibility (and privilege), and it's your call as to whether your teen can handle it.



Assuming he can, you'll still need to outline your road rules very specifically in order to avoid arguments and misunderstandings:

- Do you expect your child to fill the gas tank before bringing the car home?
- If you lend him your gas card, do you expect him to pony up his portion of the bill at month's end?
- Do you expect your child to contribute toward the increased costs of insuring a young driver?
- What consequences will there be if your child is ticketed for parking or moving violations?
- Will you allow your child to drive at night?
- If you decide to tie driving privileges to school performance, define the terms precisely. Must he maintain a "C" average to use the car? Does a failing grade—at any time, in any subject—mean a forfeiture of his keys? Spell it out.
- Speak with him often about the deadly combination of drinking and driving. If you suspect that he's involved with alcohol (see "Drugs and Alcohol: the Red Flags," page 8), confiscate his keys and license. Period.

Young drivers require more concentration as they make unfamiliar judgments about traffic and the cars they're driving. You may want to consider making rules to limit the following distractions to young drivers:

- Other passengers. May friends ride? How many? (In addition to being possible distractions, the only thing worse than backseat drivers are those who don't really know what they're talking about!)
- Eating in the car while driving (or for that matter, getting greasy chicken on those seats you just had cleaned even if the car is parked!)
  - Talking on cell phones. Will you allow it with a hands-free device? Never while the car is in motion?
  - Using the stereo. Music off while driving? Keep the volume below a certain level? No use of buttons/dials while the car is moving?



### Discipline Dilemma #5: Friends and Dating

**Smart Solution:** Ten years ago, your biggest complaint about your child's friends was probably that they climbed on your furniture and left puddles of apple juice everywhere. Now you've got heftier concerns: Why does that kid smell like cigarettes? Does that girl's hair color even exist in nature?

Alas, once your child reaches a certain age, you can't completely control who she socializes with. But what you can do is keep the lines of communication open, talk to her about your concerns and expectations, and continue to enforce your house rules.

To navigate the sticky, tricky area of your child's social life, try these ideas:

- Give peace a chance. If you don't like a certain friend, invite that friend over more often. Get to know the kid so you can make an informed judgment. A kid who you once thought was stuck-up may have actually been shy. But if you feel the teen in question truly is a bad influence, consider forbidding contact outside of school.
- If she's going to a party, call ahead to make sure the parents will be there. True, you do run the risk of your poor darling dying from embarrassment right there on the spot, but it's a chance you'll have to take.
- Expect your child to call you to clear it if plans/locations change.



#### Be clear about dating:

- Is there a certain age before which you do not want your child dating?
- May your child socialize only in group settings (not with just one other member of the opposite sex)?
- May your child date only with a family chaperone?
- May your child entertain a guest of the opposite sex in her bedroom? If the door stays open?
  - Is there a special curfew for dates?
    - Do you wish to meet your child's date before they go out?



## Natural vs. Logical Consequences

There are two basic types of consequences, natural and logical. Natural consequences are just that: natural. They happen on their own with no input from you. For example, if your teenager leaves his car unlocked and his stereo gets stolen, he's just suffered a natural consequence of his irresponsibility.

Logical consequences are the ones you enforce based on something he's done. If your child is supposed to join you for a family event, but then fails to do so, a logical consequence would be that he can't attend his own social events for a few days.

Whenever possible, rely on natural consequences: let your teen handle the repercussions of his actions. Resist the urge to rescue him—such as by driving him to school each time he oversleeps and misses the bus—and he'll soon learn to take responsibility for himself.



## Appropriate Consequences

He may be on the road to adulthood, but your teen still needs to abide by the house rules. When he doesn't, try:

- Grounding for an appropriate amount of time.
- Modified grounding. Write a few major chores (for example, weeding the garden, cleaning out the shed, etc.) on index cards. When your teenager misbehaves, select a card at random. To end the grounding, he needs to complete the specified task to your satisfaction.
- No more family car. If your teen breaks the rules, impound his wheels.
- Not chauffeuring him. Being driven around is a privilege, not a right.
- Canceling an activity (for example, no going to the skate park with friends).
- Taking away privileges (such as no Internet or DVDs).

## Try a Little Togetherness

Your teen may be racing toward adulthood, but she's not there yet. Whether she says so or not, she still wants and needs support from you. To stay connected with your teen (without suffocating her), try these suggestions:

- Eat dinner together as often as possible. She may not grasp the value of sharing macaroni and cheese with Mom and Dad, but it's there. Studies continue to show the health and academic benefits for children of sitting around the table and eating together as a family.
- Use active listening. When she says something, really pay attention. Acknowledge the feeling she's trying to convey ("Your manager does sound unreasonable. I can see why you're so frustrated"), but don't pass judgment.
- Respect her point of view. She's not a little kid anymore, so don't treat her like one. Her insightful, reasoned opinions on various issues might surprise you.
- Keep her connected to the family, even if it's by default. Instead of putting a TV in her room (never a good idea), keep the set in a central location. If she wants to watch it, she'll need to endure the company of others.
- Be welcoming. Open your home (and fridge) to her and her friends, and she'll have a huge incentive to spend more time at close by.

## Drugs and Alcohol: the Red Flags



When is a discipline issue not a discipline issue? When it's actually a sign of alcohol or drug use. Although it's not always easy to spot substance abuse in your child, there are warning signs. If she exhibits one or more of the following symptoms, it's time to intervene (see "Where to Go for Help," at right):

- She's hostile, skips school or frequently breaks curfew.
- She's hanging out with a new group of friends.
- She can't concentrate very well.
- She's lost interest in activities she once enjoyed.
- Her sleeping habits are off, or they're reversed (she sleeps all day and is awake all night).
- Her eyes are red and her nose is runny, but she isn't ill.
- Household money regularly goes missing.

## Where to Go for Help

Some discipline-related issues are too complicated to be handled at home. If you need help dealing with your teen's behavior, here are some places to find it:

- Her teacher, principal or guidance counselor.
- Other authority figures in her life, such as coaches and clergy.
- Her pediatrician or your family physician (who may be able to refer you to an adolescent psychologist or behaviorist).
- The Internet. Organizations like ToughLove® International ([www.toughlove.org](http://www.toughlove.org)) and the American Academy of Pediatrics ([www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)) offer helpful parenting information.

## Drugs and Alcohol: An Ounce of Prevention

According to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America®, by the time your child reaches age 16, her thoughts about drugs (and about the drug-related messages you've been sending) are pretty set.

Nevertheless, it's important to continue reinforcing the idea that drugs and alcohol are dangerous and must be avoided. Here's how:

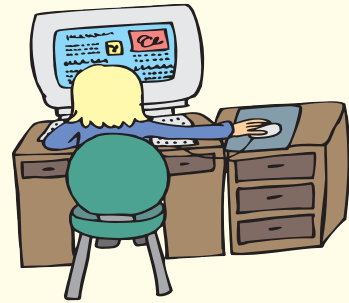
- Keep talking. If you see a news report about alcohol or drug abuse, use it as a jumping-off point for your own conversation.
- Give her specific examples about why drugs are trouble—drugs can harm her chances at a good future, they're illegal, they cause birth defects and they can lead to addiction.
- Find opportunities for her to volunteer someplace where she can see the impact of drug use. Shelters, hospitals and community outreach centers all serve people who've been hurt by drugs.
- Spend lots of time with her, and continue staying involved in her life.
- Keep in mind that she values your opinion. She may spend as much or more time with friends as she does at home, but your input is hugely important to her.

## Technology Tamers

According to a 32-year study, children's watching of TV violence was a big predictor of whether they'd be aggressive later in life. Not only that, but too much tube time can easily breed couch potatoes and poor students.

To minimize your teen's exposure to violence and adult content, follow these guidelines:

- Limit his TV, computer and video game time to no more than a couple of hours each day.
- Be aware of what he's watching, especially if you subscribe to premium cable channels or own a satellite dish.
- When possible, watch TV together.
- Don't put a television in his room.
- Keep the family computer in a high traffic area, such as the kitchen, and talk with him about Internet safety (don't worry that he's more tech savvy than you are—you're more "safety savvy").
- Use filters to block Internet pornography (these are not a substitute for parental supervision, however).
- Just say no. If you're seriously bothered by what (and who) he's encountering online, consider dropping Internet service on the computer he uses. He can still use the computer for word processing and data storage, but you won't have to worry about the constant flow of questionable material into your home.



## For More Information

### **"Children, Adolescents, and Televison"**

American Academy of Pediatrics  
[www.aap.org/policy/re0043.html](http://www.aap.org/policy/re0043.html)

### **Go to Your Room!**

by Shari Steelsmith  
 Parenting Press  
 1-800-992-6657  
[www.parentingpress.com](http://www.parentingpress.com)

### **"How Can I Talk to My Child About Drugs? Grades 10-12" and "Is Your Child Using Drugs? How to Find Out"**

Partnership for a Drug-Free America®  
[www.drugfreeamerica.org](http://www.drugfreeamerica.org)

### **"Modified Grounding"**

Center for Effective Parenting  
[www.parenting-ed.org/handout3/Discipline%20and%20Intervention%20Strategie/grounding.htm](http://www.parenting-ed.org/handout3/Discipline%20and%20Intervention%20Strategie/grounding.htm)

### **"Parenting Pre-Teens: 3 Steps to Active Listening"**

RaisingKids.com,  
[www.raisingkids.co.uk/9\\_13/pre\\_htp10.asp](http://www.raisingkids.co.uk/9_13/pre_htp10.asp)

### **Surviving Your Adolescents**

by Thomas W. Phelan, Ph.D.  
 Child Management, Inc.

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*How to Help Children Do Their Best on Tests*  
*Helping Children Get Organized for Homework and Schoolwork*

### **School Success—Set 3**

*Help Your Child Develop Good Learning Styles*  
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### **When There is a Problem—Set 1**

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*Help Your Child Deal With Peer Pressure*  
*How to Help Your Struggling Student*

### **Other Important Titles**

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*What to Do If Your Child Has ADD/ADHD*  
*Common Discipline Problems of Middle School Children and How to Solve Them*  
*Making a Smooth Transition to Middle School*

*For more information about these and other materials for  
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