

How Much Independence Should I Give my Tween?

by
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As children enter adolescence, they often beg for more freedom. Parents walk a tightrope between wanting their children to be confident and able to do things for themselves and knowing that the world can be a dangerous place with threats to their children's health and safety.

Some parents allow too much of the wrong kind of freedom or they offer freedom before the adolescent is ready to accept it. Other parents cling too tightly, denying young teens both the responsibilities they require to develop maturity and the opportunities they need to make choices and accept the consequences.

Research shows that adolescents do best when they remain closely connected to their parents but at the same time are allowed to have their own points of view and even to disagree with their parents. Here are some tips to help balance closeness and independence:

Set limits. All children sometimes resist limits, but they want them and they need them. In a world that can seem too hectic for adults and adolescents alike, limits provide security. Often, adolescents whose parents do not set limits feel unloved. Setting limits is most effective when it begins early. It is harder but not impossible, however, to establish limits during early adolescence.

Be clear. Most young teens respond best to specific instructions, which are repeated regularly. Don't just say, "I want your room clean," because your child does not know what that truly means. Instead, in a non-argumentative way say, "This is how I perceive a clean room."

Give reasonable choices. Choices make young teens more open to guidance. For example, you can tell your son that his algebra homework must be done before bedtime, but that he has a choice of completing it either before or after supper. Or you can tell your 14-year-old daughter that she cannot hang around the video arcade with her friends on Saturday night, but she can have a group of friends over to your house to watch a movie. Using humor and creativity as you give choices may also make your child more willing to accept them.

Grant independence in stages. The more mature and responsible a young teen's behavior is, the more privileges parents can grant. You might first give your child the right to choose which sneakers to buy within a certain price range. Later you can let him make other clothing purchases—with the understanding that price tags won't be removed until you approve the items. Eventually, you can give him a clothing allowance to spend as he likes.

Health and safety come first. Your most important responsibility as a parent is to protect your child's health and safety. Your child needs to know that your love for her requires you to veto activities and choices that threaten either of these. Let your child know what things threaten her health and safety—and the health and safety of others—and put your foot down.

Doing this can be difficult, though, because adolescents have a sense that nothing can hurt them. At the same time that he feels that everything he experiences is new and unique, an adolescent also believes that what happens to others will not happen to him. His beliefs are based on the fact that adolescence is the healthiest period of time during our lives. In this period, physical illnesses are not common and fatal disease is rare. The important thing to emphasize to your child is that, while he may be very healthy, death and injury during adolescence are most often caused by violence and accidents.

Say no to choices that cut off future options. Some things are not worth fighting about. It may offend you if your son wears a shirt to school that clashes wildly with his pants, but this is not a choice that can cut off future possibilities for him. Young teens may have a growing sense of the future, but they still lack the experiences required to fully understand how a decision they make today could affect them tomorrow. They may have heard that smoking is unhealthy, but they do not fully understand what it means to die of lung cancer at the age of 45.

Talk to your children about the lifelong consequences of choices they make. Help them understand there are good and bad decisions and that knowing one from the other can make all the difference in their lives. Let your child know that you are "the keeper of options" until he is old enough and responsible enough to assume this responsibility. He may not skip school and he may not avoid taking tough courses that will prepare him for college.

Guide, but resist the temptation to control.

Effective parenting requires striking a good balance between laying down the law and allowing too much freedom. With most young teens, it is easiest to maintain this balance by guiding but not controlling. Young teens need opportunities to explore different roles, try on new personalities and experiment. They need to learn that choices have consequences. That means making some mistakes and accepting the results. However, parents need to provide guidance so that young teens avoid making too many poor choices.

You can guide by being a good listener and by asking questions that help your child to think about the results of her actions. For example, you might say, "What could happen if you let someone who is drunk drive you home?" Your guidance may be better appreciated if you ask your child's advice on a range of matters and follow the advice if it seems reasonable: "What should we cook for Daddy's birthday?" or "I don't have to work on Saturday. Is there anything special you'd like to do?"

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The fine line between guiding and controlling may be different for different children. Some children, whether they are 7 or 17, need firmer guidance and fewer privileges than do other children at the same age.

Let kids make mistakes. We want our children to grow into adults who can solve problems and make good choices. These abilities are a critical part of being independent. To develop these abilities, however, young teens on occasion may need to fail, provided the stakes are not too high and no one's health or safety is at risk. Making mistakes also allows young teens to learn one critical skill—how to bounce back. It is hard for a child to learn how to pick himself up and start over if his parents always rescue him from difficulties.

Make actions have consequences. If you tell your child that she must be home by 10 p.m., do not ignore her midnight arrival. You lose credibility with your child if she suffers no consequences for returning home two hours late. However, the punishment should fit the crime. Grounding a child for six weeks restricts the entire family. Instead, you might talk with your child about how coming in two hours late has affected you. You have been up worrying and have missed your sleep, but you will still have to get up the next morning at your regular time, make breakfast, do your chores and go to work. Because her lack of consideration has made your life harder, she will have to complete some of your chores so that you can get to bed earlier the next night.

Finally and despite what we often hear and read, adolescents look to their parents first and foremost in shaping their lives. When it comes to morals and ethics, political beliefs and religion, teenagers almost always have more in common with their parents than their parents believe. As a parent, you should look beyond the surface to who your child is becoming. Your teenager may want to dye her hair purple and pierce most parts of her body, but these expressions may be independent of her sense of who she is and who she will become.

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