

Teaching Responsibility to Preteens, Teens

Many parents who want their preteen or teen to do well in school and stay out of trouble feel like “laying down the law” or forcing their child to do what they think is best. When their child rebels or refuses to do what they demand, they’re surprised or upset. Young people actually have many good ideas about how to deal with problems. When they can contribute to rules and other decisions, they are likely to follow through with improved behavior. This fact sheet offers ways, aimed at young people between the ages of 10 and 18, for parents to help their children learn about responsibility and solve problems at home or school.

Gradually let go

From their child’s birth to around 18 years, parents gradually need to widen a child’s responsibility. Parents do almost everything for their child during infancy. However, the child gradually learns to do simple things—feeding oneself, walking, making needs known, learning how to dress, and so on. Parents usually are anxious for the baby and small child to do more and are proud of each new thing their child learns. It’s easy to forget, however, that preteens and teens also need to continue to do more things for themselves. The goal is for young people at age 18 or so to be able to live on their own and make decisions.

Parents who continue to solve their preteen’s problems or make their decisions make it more difficult for their child to become a responsible adult. Unwanted parental control at

Is there a serious problem here?

Larry and Jean were concerned about their son’s grades. Brad, 13, usually got Bs and Cs but last quarter he got two Ds. They had taken away privileges but things hadn’t improved. Otherwise, Brad seemed to be doing fine. He was in sports and had good friends his parents knew and liked. He got along with the family and usually finished household chores. Since Larry and Jean had run out of ideas, they decided to talk to him and try to work out a solution.

this age has two possible outcomes, neither of which is healthy.

Some children with controlling parents never learn to stand on their own two feet. Even as adults, they cannot make decisions and may have trouble living away from home. Others react to excessive control by becoming rebellious. When they no longer live at home, they may behave in ways their parents had tried to prevent; they may use alcohol or drugs, engage in promiscuous sex or other dangerous behavior. On the other hand, parents who gradually let their child take responsibility and solve his or her own problems help prepare that child for adulthood.

Long-term parenting

The kind of parenting that gets young people to do what you want in the short term doesn’t usually teach long-term goals, such as responsibility and maturity. Short-term parenting is characterized by:

- adult power and control;
- nagging and bossing;
- trying to prevent a child’s mistakes;
- harsh punishment;
- insistence on “their” way, and
- a concern for, “What will other people think?”

One problem of short-term parenting is that children and teens may do what parents want while they’re watching, but go behind their parents’ backs to do what they want when parents are not around. Long-term parenting takes time and may not appear to be working at first. However, young people gradually develop responsibility and the ability to think for themselves. Long-term parenting is recognized by:

- parents who share feelings with their children;
- help from children in setting rules and consequences and solving problems;
- helping young people learn from mistakes;
- respectful listening, and
- a concern with, “What will my children think about themselves?”

Joint problem-solving

Young people can suggest possible solutions to any situation that causes trouble for their parents or themselves—household chores, homework, peers, schedules, even fighting with brothers and sisters. Joint problem-solving, in which parents involve their child to brainstorm solutions, is a good way to teach responsibility and how to make decisions.

Here are five steps to use:

1. Describe the problem. If the problem concerns a bothersome behavior, describe the problem specifically. For example, when your child does not do chores, you might say, "I don't like it when you don't unload the dishwasher like you agreed to because we have no place for the dirty dishes." If your child has a problem, ask him or her to describe the situation. For example, your daughter might say, "With basketball and band and working on the yearbook, I've got so much to do that I never have time to just relax."

2. Tell how you feel about the situation (both parent and child). This may be the hardest step. It's usually easy to know how you feel but it may be difficult to acknowledge what your child feels. With the dishwasher problem, you might say, "I feel really frustrated" and your child may say, "I don't think it's fair that I have to unload the dishwasher." It's important to let your child know that you hear what he or she is saying. In this example, a parent might reply, "So you think you shouldn't have to do it." Listening to each other's point of view is important if you really want to solve the problem. When people feel heard, they are more likely to work on a solution.

3. Brainstorm possible solutions. In this step, it's important to list several ways to deal with the situation. Do not criticize ideas or point out why some solutions won't work. At this stage, generate as many ideas as possible.

Possible solutions include:

- having someone else unload the dishwasher (child's suggestion);
- having the child unload the dishwasher before dinner;
- using paper plates so there are no dishes (child's suggestion);

- taking turns each week, and
- allowing the child to choose another job instead (child's idea).

4. Try a solution. After several solutions have been listed, choose one to try for a specific period of time. In the above example, let's say the parent and child can agree on the last suggestion. At this point it's important to be as specific as possible. The child may agree to vacuum on Saturday morning instead of unloading the dishwasher. Together you must decide what rooms will be vacuumed and by what time the chore will be finished.

5. Select a time to check back. Whenever you and your child decide upon a solution, it's important to name a time, such as one to two weeks later, to see if the solution is working. If not, select another idea from the list to try.

Follow through

Unfortunately, the majority of teens will not always keep their end of a bargain, even though they may have had good intentions. In the dishwasher example, perhaps the child's friend may have called and wanted to shoot baskets Saturday morning, and the agreement to vacuum may have been "forgotten." It's a parent's responsibility to follow through with reminders about the agreement. When the child heads for the door, Mom might say, "You promised to vacuum by noon." If reminders don't help, the solution isn't working. Try another solution.

This follow-up detail has a number of traps for parents, including:

- the idea that parents and their children have the same priorities. Face it, youngsters usually don't usually care as much as parents about a clean house. Instead, let your child know that you expect him or her to keep an agreement.

- a parent who criticizes, judges or calls names instead of focusing on the task. Comments such as, "How can you be so irresponsible!" and "You live like a pig!" don't help the situation. Parents can say, "Our agreement was that the vacuuming would be done by noon."
- not getting agreements in advance.

Other suggestions

Instead of lecturing, use one word—"agreement" or "vacuuming." Sometimes parents don't need to use words at all; a look, a smile, a raised eyebrow, or pointing to a coat dropped on the floor may be enough. What we say and do must be appropriate to the age and maturity of the child and the situation. Parents need to retain dignity and respect for themselves by following through, instead of giving up and letting a child do whatever he or she wants to do. At the same time, parents need to be respectful of the youngster, knowing that he or she will often resist. In some situations, it may help to write down the agreement, not as a threat but as a record.

Involvement of children in solving problems and providing parental follow through never involves threats. This method allows parents to hold onto their power and respect, while letting their children keep theirs. It feels good for everyone and teaches cooperation and decision making. Once parents get used to using long-range parenting they can feel good about giving their children the best possible chance of becoming responsible, caring adults.

For more information, read *I'm On Your Side: Resolving Conflict with Your Teenage Son or Daughter* by J. Nelsen and L. Lott, or *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World* by H.S. Glenn and J. Nelsen, from Sunrise Books, 1-800-456-7770.

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