Setting Limits with Teens

As children move into the teen years they start to think more like adults. This is both good news and bad.

In the teen years a person can start to think about thinking. Teens consider possibilities as well as realities. This provides them the ability to analyze their own thinking and refine it. It also leads them to question other people and institutions. For many adults it is insufferable to watch a teen start questioning wise adults and time-honored traditions.

Yet it is an important development. As teens move into adulthood, they should have thought about what they believe. If they test, challenge, and explore before they make commitments, they are more likely to hold enduring and sensible ideas. As teens move into adulthood they are likely to hold values much like those of their parents; they will hold them as their own if they have had opportunities to test and think through the values. As Ginott says, ‘No one can mature by blindly obeying his parents’ (1969, p.150). To better understand teens, read the unit in this series, ‘The Challenge of Being a Teen.’

Parents of teens have the challenge of encouraging such questioning and independence in our teens while helping them honor sensible principles of respect and safety.

Parents of teens should listen respectfully to their teens’ ideas. We can ask questions and offer our view but it is not helpful to criticize or belittle them.

Teens turn out best when their parents monitor their activities. Wise parents keep track of their teens, their friends, their hobbies, and their activities. When teens announce that they are going out, involved parents invite them to talk about where they are going and what they will be doing.

There are times to set firm limits. There will be times when we need to say, ‘I don’t feel good about you going to that party.’ Teens are likely to resist. We can stay calm. ‘What else could you do?’ When they still object we can reply, ‘I can see that you would really like to go to that party. Since you are not able to go, what else could you do?’

When teens make rude comments or act insensitively, we can help them discover better ways of acting. Teaching is better than attacking. For example, we might say, ‘I can see that you don’t like some of your classmates. When you say unkind things to them, they probably feel very bad.’ Teens may play as if they do not care. But gentle messages of compassion have an impact. ‘We do not belittle their dreams and desires, but we reserve the right to stop and redirect some of their acts’ (Ginott, 1969, p.150).

Applications:

What are some of the things your teen is excited about? How can you support those healthy explorations?

What are some evidences you see that your teen is making good decisions? In what areas could you commend him or her: ‘I’m impressed with the way you decide what movies are worth watching.’

Do you have a policy about unacceptable activities? An example is: ‘We do not do anything that harms others or endangers our future.’ Talk with your teen about the policy that he or she thinks should be enforced. Encourage teens to work with you in forming family rules and policies.

For more information on helping your adolescent, you might enjoy reading “Between Parent and Teenager” by Haim Ginott.