

RULES FOR TEENS – CAREGIVER

Teenagers and Rules. Teenagers need clear rules and boundaries from caregivers. Most teenagers will tell you that they do better when they have some rules and structure, even if they argue or debate with you about the rules. As a caregiver, it is important that you set clear rules and boundaries when they are called for. Here are 13 tips for setting rules with teens:

1. ***Make the Right Number of Rules.*** Only a limited number of rules can be regularly enforced. Rules should be about things that are genuinely important. Don't waste rules on things that are minor. Make a distinction between:
 - a. Problems that call for clear, non-negotiable rules (for example, if a teenager is skipping school, set a non-negotiable school attendance rule; or if a teenager is hitting a younger sibling at home, set a non-negotiable no hitting rule).
 - b. Things where there might be some caregiver-teen disagreement, but that are open for negotiation, within limits. For example, some caregivers might feel that curfews can be negotiated, within limits, depending on the situation and the teenager.
 - c. Finally, there are things where you can allow your teenager freedom within reason. You can allow your teenager to begin making their own choices for themselves, within reason, about a number of things. For example, picking what clothes or hairstyle to wear, so long as they are reasonably appropriate. Their choices might not always be the same as your choices would be for them, but these are areas where you can allow them more freedom and independence, and where the risk of negative consequences is low.

Sorting these out will help you get the right number of rules. Write down some examples of things that you think call for clear rules with your teen, things that you think could be open to some negotiation, and things where you think your teen can have freedom within reason.

2. ***Make Your Rules Clear and Specific.*** Good rules are specific. Plug all possible loopholes. Anyone should be able to tell whether the rule is being followed or broken. For example, a caregiver might make a rule for, "No profanity in our home." This might be a very appropriate rule if a teenager has a problem in this area. However, the wording of the rule could lead to a debate about whether or not certain words are actually "profanity." This might require you to make a more specific rule listing some of the exact words that are not allowed in your home.
3. ***Rules Should Address a Real and Serious Problem.*** There is no point laying down a rule if your teenager is already following it on their own. For example, there is no point in making a rule about doing homework and chores before watching television if your teenager is already doing a reasonably good job keeping up with homework and chores on their own. Just compliment them for the good job they are doing. Also, once a teenager has begun following a rule consistently over time, they may no longer need the rule. In this case, you can lift

the rule and compliment them for their improvement. Also, there is no point in making a rule about something that is minor and isn't a real problem.

4. **Enforce Rules Consistently.** This is key. Unless you've granted an exception in advance, or unless it was impossible to follow the rule, there should be a consequence 100% of the time when the rule is broken. In many cases, it is useful to have the consequence identified in advance. We will talk more about picking consequences later.
5. **Enforce Rules Promptly.** Don't nag. For requests, ask once; then ask a second time with a warning; then if it isn't done, enforce the consequence.
6. **Rules Should Be Enforceable.** For a rule to be enforceable, it is important that you are able to know clearly whether the rule is being followed or not. For example, if you set a rule for "no fighting at school," you may not be able to enforce that rule unless you set up some way to know whether it is being followed. Make sure you are able to find out how well a rule is being followed before you set it.
7. **Rules Should Be Feasible.** Following the rule should be within your teenager's capability. If they break the rule, it should be because they choose to break it, or because they were not responsible or unable to follow it. For example, setting a rule requiring a 3.0 grade-point average might be beyond the capability of a teenager with serious learning and attention problems; requiring a teenager to be some place at a set time might not be feasible unless the teenager has some degree of control over transportation.
8. **Adults in Charge Should Agree on Rules and Consequences.** It is important that all the adults in charge agree on the rule and enforce it equally. Caregivers and other adults in charge should present a "united front" when it comes to supporting the rules, and should give the same consequences if a rule is broken. One caregiver shouldn't be "soft" and the other "harsh." If there is disagreement among the adults in charge, work this out privately before setting the rule or delivering the consequence.
9. **Things Don't Have To Be Completely Equal and Fair.** You can have different rules for different children in the same family. Children may have different rules because they are different ages or they may have different problems and require different rules. For example, if one teenager is disregarding their homework, they may be the only one in the family to have a rule about finishing homework first. Expect to hear complaints about how this is "not fair." You could explain that, "Your sister doesn't have a problem with homework, and when you show me that I can count on you to keep up with your homework every night, then you'll get the same privileges."
10. **Expect Rules to Be Argued and Tested.** In fact, behavior sometimes will

worsen before it starts to improve. It is common for teenagers to test rules you set—to push until they find the limit or until they determine that the rule is for real and that you won't give in. Don't expect rules to work or be followed immediately. You have to stick with them. This is especially true for teens who may have received little structure in the past. Their initial reaction to having structure may be negative. But if you stick with the structure in a firm but kind way, they will usually come around and do better because of it.

11. **Enforce Rules Unemotionally.** The time to confront your teenager with a broken rule or to enforce a rule is when you are calm. If you are angry, wait until you are calm. It is more important to calm down than it is to confront the rule breaking immediately. If you are calm, you will be better able to ignore any arguing, excuses or dramatic behavior from your teen. Remember, you are setting an example for how to handle conflicts maturely.
12. **It Is Often Helpful to Get Your Teenager's Input into Rules.** Pick a time when both you and your teenager are calm (not arguing) and ask your teenager's opinion about what rules and consequences seem reasonable to them. It is important to remember that getting your teenager's input about rules does not mean that you are giving up your authority. You will listen to their input and think about it, but you will still make the final decision about what rules are necessary. You may get some good ideas from your teen.
13. **Use Positive Rewards In Addition to Enforcing Rules and Giving Consequences.** Punishment and negative consequences are effective only when they are paired with positive reinforcement for accomplishments and success. You will get the best results by mixing occasional punishment and negative consequences with regular doses of praise, compliments, rewards and reinforcement.
 - a. Give specific compliments when they do well. It is good to point out specifically what they have done well when giving a compliment. For example, if your teenager had been dodging their homework, but then turns that around and starts doing it on time, you could simply say, "You did a great job getting your homework done on time today." You don't have to lay it on thick with teenagers. Short compliments work.
 - b. Don't mix compliments with criticism or questioning—it will spoil the effect of the compliment. For example, you would not want to say, "You did a good job on your homework today—why can't you do that all the time?"
 - c. Use earned privileges as a reward (e.g., extra computer time, game time, video time, recreational activities).
 - d. Tell your teenager when they have done something that makes you proud of them.
 - e. Offer something special and unexpected when they have done well. It doesn't have to be fancy or expensive to be effective. For example, you might say, "You've been working so hard on your math grade that I thought you might like to_____."

