



## Understanding the Nature of Effective Parenting

By

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Raising kids can be extremely rewarding. It can also be frustrating and exhausting. While they can bring indescribable joy to your life, kids can also test your patience and your ability to manage them. Unfortunately, kids aren't born with a "how to parent me" instruction manual. As a result, parents are often left wondering how to best parent their kids, especially during times of stress or crisis. Fortunately, there are proven strategies that can help make parenting easier and more effective.

### A Kid's Job is to Test Limits

First, it is helpful to understand that a kid's job is to test the limits. Testing limits is how kids learn about the world around them. For example, a young child may open cabinet doors and begin to pull pots and pans from the cabinets. As they empty the cabinets, they are exploring the boundaries of their environment and "learning" what happens next. A teenager, on the other hand, may test the limits by staying out past curfew. In both examples, they are testing the limits of their environment and "learning" what the responses will be to their behavior.

### A Parent's Job is to Set Limits

Second, it is also helpful to understand that a parent's job is to set the limits. Setting limits is how kids learn to work within the world. If a parent doesn't set the limits, then their kids tend to keep pushing the boundaries until some form of consequences occur. For example, the child who empties the cabinets may begin to explore the cabinets that hold household

cleaners. Obviously, if limits are not set, then the child could inadvertently consume toxic chemicals. The teenager who stays out past curfew, on the other hand, may begin to stay out all night and start using alcohol or drugs. Without limits, both the child and the teenager, thus, may begin to engage in risky behaviors. As a result, by setting limits, parents are helping their kids learn to function appropriately in the world around them. Without limits, kids tend to become more out of control and begin to feel unsafe.

As a parent, once you accept the basic rules of the game, you no longer have to get upset when your kids test the limits. They are just doing their job. As a parent, you also no longer have to feel guilty when you set the limits, because you are just doing your job.

### Steps to Create Effective Rules and Consequences

As parents, we never get to choose which limits that our kids test, we only get to choose how we respond to them. As a result, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of how to effectively set limits. Listed below are some basic rules for effective parenting.

- **Develop Predictable Rules and Consequences** – It is important to create rules that are predictable. If kids don't know what the rules are, how are they supposed to follow them? The rules and the consequences for breaking those rules need to be predictable for all involved.
- **Develop Consistent Rules and Consequences** – Once the rules and consequences are created, they need to be consistently followed. If the rules are always changing, then

kids learn to ignore the rules and will begin to lose respect for what you say as a parent.

- **Create Natural Consequences** – Natural consequences are the best tool to help your kids learn from their mistakes. Create targeted consequences that fit the behavior and your kid will begin to make better decisions.
- **Create Enforceable Rules** – It is important to create rules that you are able and willing to enforce. Assume that your child or teenager will test whatever rule that you create. If you aren't willing or able to enforce it, you are simply teaching your kid to ignore you.
- **Create Rules That Teach Rather Than Punish** - Effective rules teach kids things that help prepare them for life. Don't get overly invested in rules that mirror what you "had to do when you were a kid." Instead, ask yourself, "What am I trying to teach my child and what is the best way to teach them today?"
- **Get Buy-In from Everyone** - It is much easier to get children and teenagers to follow the rules when they feel like they had a role in creating them. When children and adolescents participate in creating the rules and defining the consequences, they are more likely to feel like the rules are fair and equitable.

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### Use Consequences Instead of Yelling

A common mistake that parents make is that they try to "save" their kids from the consequences of their behavior. Instead of giving the consequences, they only threaten to give the consequences. Unfortunately, kids often ignore these threats which leads to increasing frustration for the parents. As the frustration rises, many parents resort to "yelling" at their kid until they comply. Over time many kids begin to ignore the yelling which only leads to more yelling. A much better strategy is to replace the yelling with consequences. If you allow your child to experience the consequences of their behavior, they will learn much more quickly and the mood of the home will be happier.



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## A Toolbox for Parents

- **Be Purposeful About the Rules** - In order to help your child develop the tools they need to thrive as an adult, it is important to create an environment that teaches skills, responsibilities, respect, and values. To accomplish this, it is helpful to ask yourself the following questions.
  - ◆ What is the purpose of this rule?
  - ◆ What do I hope that my child will learn?
  - ◆ Are there better ways to teach my child the same thing?
  - ◆ Given our family dynamics, schedules, personalities, etc., will the rule get enforced or will it get dropped when things get hard?
- **Act Don't React** - Be thoughtful and purposeful about your actions. If your child or teenager is testing the limits, take some time to think through the issues and develop a plan of action that matches your goals for them.
- **Cool Off If Needed** - If things get heated, cool off rather than letting the situation escalate or get out of control.
- **Choose Your Battles Wisely** - The older kids get the less power you have to make them do what you want. Rather than battling over everything, focus on those areas that are most important.
- **Be Selective About When You Give Consequences** - Remember that you get to choose when you give consequences. If your teenager refuses to give you their cell phone, you don't have to physically take it from them. You can always turn off the service later or add additional consequences if needed.
- **Be a Role Model** - Show your child how you want them to act. If you yell at them, you are simply teaching them to yell back.
- **Be Respectful** - If you want your child to be respectful to you, show them how by being respectful to them.
- **Be a Parent, Not a Friend** - Your kid doesn't need you to be their friend. They need you to guide them and help them prepare to be an adult.
- **Be Involved** - One of the ways to show your child that you love them is to be interested and involved in their life.

## Parenting Teenagers

Teenagers create unique parenting challenges. As they transition from childhood toward adulthood, they begin to test the boundaries around them in new ways. During this time, teenagers begin to separate from their families and begin the process of defining who they are as a person. Their friendships become increasingly important and they often begin to resist parental guidance. They also frequently seek approval from their peers as they try to be "different" from their parents.

Teenagers want independence, but still want parents to be available. It is almost as though teens want parents to be "on call" just in case they need you. Teenagers also want freedom, but still depend on their parents. Many teens begin to feel like they "don't need" their parents, yet in the same breath can ask you for money to buy new clothes.

### Parenting Strategies for Raising Teenagers

Listed below are some useful strategies that can help you navigate the teenage years.

- **Set limits that match their age and maturity.** - Rules that made sense when a kid was 12 may no longer fit when a kid turns 17. Teens need more freedom, but they also should have corresponding responsibilities. The more responsible they are, the more freedom they should have.
- **Always move in the direction of treating your teen as a young adult.** - Remember that one of your primary jobs as a parent is to teach your teen to become self-sufficient. If you do everything for them or don't allow them to make their own mistakes, they will be

unprepared to live independently.

- **Give your teen opportunities to make their own decisions.** - Encourage your teen to make their own decisions. This doesn't mean that you give them free reign to make any decision they want. Instead, give them choices and let them decide for themselves. It will help them develop self-confidence and learn to make better decisions in the future.
- **Let them learn from natural consequences.** - Don't try to overprotect your teen from the consequences of their behavior. Instead of rescuing them, let them learn from their mistakes. Natural consequences are the best teacher.
- **Be aware of who your teenager is hanging out with.** - Remember that peers are a huge influence on your teenager. You can't choose your teen's friends, but you can limit how much access they have to them.
- **Trust but verify.** - It is easier to trust your teen if you know that they are where they said they would be and doing what they said they would do.
- **Look for teachable moments.** - Your teen is going to make mistakes. When they do, use those mistakes as opportunities to teach them and help them grow.