



# Discipline (teens)

Parenting SA  
Parent Easy Guide **37**

**Discipline is an important part of a child's upbringing and it continues to be important when they are teenagers. They still need discipline to feel secure and safe while learning to get along with others and to live in society. The best discipline leads to young people learning self-discipline.**

**Often there is confusion for parents when 'discipline' and 'punishment' are talked about. They are frequently used to mean the same thing, when in fact they are quite different. As your children grow into adolescents you need to use a different discipline approach from the one you might have used during their childhood.**

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.  
Change to suit your child's sex.*

## Why do I need to change?

- Adolescence is a time when children move quickly from being dependent where they look up to you and usually want to please, to becoming independent and wanting to make their own decisions and think for themselves. This path is not always smooth because the changes can be hard to cope with for both you and your teenager. This is a time for parents to gradually help teenagers to take responsibility for themselves.
- During adolescence your children may seem to temporarily reject your values and it is easy to become frustrated and distressed and feel that you have lost your influence and control over your children.
- Shouting, stubbornness, irrational behaviour, sulkiness and crying can be expected from time to time as they 'test out the waters'.
- No matter how well-meaning your teenager, a lack of experience, heightened emotions or impulsive thinking can sometimes result in poor judgement and and poor decisions.
- It can be a difficult time for everyone and requires consideration and patience on all sides (usually more from parents).

## What parents can do

### Build the relationship

- Work on your relationship with your son or daughter first, because no discipline will be successful unless this is the basis. Having a good relationship takes time. Often you need to do things together on their terms.

- Listen to their ideas without trying to force your ideas on them. Take an interest in what is important to them and you will have a good baseline to work from.
- Be willing to listen to their concerns without over-reacting or playing down their comments - this keeps the door open for them to tell you their problems.
- Trusting your teenager is an important part of your relationship. Trust has to be earned by both of you. Remind yourself that your teenager is struggling with lots of new feelings and his behaviour could be showing genuine unhappiness which needs your concern.

### Set limits that stick

Teenagers need some rules and limits. It works best if you can work these out together with your teenager so that she feels she has some choice. This means there is more chance of her being responsible. Be mindful that limits for 13 year olds are not suitable for 15 year olds and are far less suitable for 17 year olds.

- Allow for some risk taking, but also keep your teenager's safety in mind. You need to have some rules that protect your teenager's safety away from home and some for how she behaves in the home.
- Try to find out from other parents what limits they are setting and remember that if you are too far away from what their friends' parents are doing, you will have much more difficulty in getting your teenager to cooperate with you.
- Don't decide on rules in the middle of a crisis, especially if your teenager is in trouble for doing something wrong.
- Gradually remove the limits as your teenager takes over the reins of her own life.

### What happens when the rules are broken?

Just because rules are broken does not mean there shouldn't be any rules. When rules are broken, there needs to be some consequence but this has to be carefully thought about. Whatever you decide, your teenager is likely to see it as punishment and be resentful, but if you don't take any action you are making it more difficult for yourself next time.

- Before you jump in and react, look for the cause. Listen first to what your teenager has to say.
- Make consequences that fit the rules that were broken, eg if they come home late, they have to come home earlier next time. Only make consequences that you can follow through with and remember, don't make too many or they won't work.
- What works for one young person might not work for another.
- Your teenager must know very clearly beforehand what the consequences will be by talking over these sorts of things together. It is important that any consequences you set are not so heavy that they stop your teenager from wanting to try.
- Set consequences that can be quickly completed and then give your teenager a chance to try again, eg *"You came home very late after we agreed on a time, so tomorrow I will pick you up"* or *"Tomorrow you will have to stay home"*.

### Be reasonable about what you expect

Parents may feel that they put in a lot of effort with their teenager and they are often hurt when even the most reasonable agreements are not kept. This is normal and part of your teenager testing. It is wiser not to over-react.

Expect and insist on a fair share in helping with chores so that your teenager learns to contribute, feels a part of the family and shares the load. Expect that you will often have to remind him and that in his eyes he is *"the only one doing anything"* and that he *"has done heaps already!"*

Think about your own reasons for setting limits and consequences, eg are they reasonable or is it just because you were brought up that way?

What you say to yourself makes all the difference in how you cope with teenage problems. If you think, *"Why should I have to put up with this behaviour?"* you are more likely to act in a way that drags out the battle, than if you think, *"My son is struggling at the moment and I need to work out the best way to sort this out"*.

Don't accept being treated badly. If behaviour seems to be getting out of control or there is violence, you need to get support.

### Written in Partnership

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### Your approach will make a difference

Expect that things won't always go according to plan, for teenagers will test the limits.

Try to be reasonable and flexible for special occasions, eg school socials, special parties.

Be generous in times of stress, such as exams or a romance break-up. It will be appreciated.

Where there is a concern about safety, you need to hold your position.

The way you handle broken rules is important. If you lose your cool, your teenager will certainly lose his. Making a big scene when your teenager is 10 minutes late creates unnecessary conflict for all. It is better to not make a big deal of it and save the consequence for when rules are broken in a serious way.

Continually reminding your teenager of past mistakes is not helpful. It is important to give your teenager a chance to try again after a mistake. Mistakes are how we all learn.

### Reminders

- **Check your own expectations - are they reasonable?**
- **Make the consequence fit and don't let them drag out. They lose their point.**
- **Ask yourself how important it is to 'win' the battle. Focus on the important things and learn to overlook minor ones.**
- **Remember even when you love your teenagers you can still get angry and dislike what they do at times.**
- **Don't store up bad feelings from the last time your teenager broke the rules.**
- **Look after yourself. Get support, talk to others and give yourself a 'break' without feeling guilty.**
- **Hang in there. Don't give up on your child. The best resource your child has is you.**

### Want more information?

Parenting SA - [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

(parenting and child health information) - [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)

See other Parent Easy Guides (PEGs):

Living with teens, Teenage parties, When can my child?, Abuse to parents, What about parents' rights?

**Parent Helpline**  
**1300 364 100**



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