

A Smart Approach to Teen Discipline

Discipline is an important part of guiding children to become successful adults. How we discipline lays the foundation for effective communication and healthy development. But it can also be a source of disagreement and discontent. It's not easy. But it's possible. And it all starts with building a comprehensive approach that makes use of effective strategies. The kind known to support teens towards learning important lessons. Lessons they will take along with them as they become parents later in life, shaping the next generation.

Defining Discipline

Understanding the word "discipline" is central to creating an effective approach. It shares the root with the word disciple, which means to teach or to guide. Ideally, you discipline in a loving way. Start by asking yourself if you are attempting to teach when discipline is called for. By doing so, it's more likely you're taking a constructive disciplinary approach for the situation. If you find yourself attempting to control or punish — rather than teach — it's time to check in on your approach.

Caring and Sharing Why We Make Rules

Discipline is typically done out of care and concern for our children. We create rules to protect and guide our children. Because we care. But rules are most likely to be followed when young people understand why we set them in the first place. Because we care. [Decades of research](#) shows that parents who express caring and set very clear rules, raise emotionally healthier and academically more successful children. These parents are known as balanced, or authoritative. Why? Because parents who use this parenting style have the most authority over their children. Even more so than those who simply demand their rules are followed. To learn more about this approach to parenting and how to set effective rules, check out:

- [Balanced Parenting: A Parenting Style We Know Works](#)
- [The Importance of Being a Parent, Not a Friend, to Your Teen](#)
- [Why Teens Benefit from a Balanced Parenting Style](#)
- [What Teens May Hear When Parents Set Rules](#)

Building a comprehensive approach to discipline doesn't just involve those responsible for disciplining. It is also important that we engage our teens as partners in the discipline process.

Remaining Calm

In a perfect world, we'd approach each situation with a clear, effective plan for discipline in place. But like we said, discipline

is not easy. And, it's nearly impossible when we attempt to discipline when we are angry. Calm parents do the best teaching. But remaining calm isn't always easy in the moment. There are some quick tips and strategies to keep calm and focus on the best discipline approach. Here are some articles that might help:

- [Effective Parenting Even When You Want to Explode](#)
- [A Calm State of Mind: How Parents' Calm Impacts Teen Behavior](#)

Building from Strengths

So now that you know teaching is key to discipline, it should be easy right? Just tell your teens what you want them to learn, right? Not so much. Young people will not learn or change when the focus is on everything they are doing wrong. They are more likely to learn from mistakes and make better choices in the future when guidance is based upon recognizing what they're already doing right. Learn how to start from a place of strength in these pieces:

- [Helping Teens Become Their Best Selves: Building Success from Strengths](#)
- [Disciplining Our Teens: Back to Basics](#)

Getting on the Same Page

Sometimes it's hard to get two people agreeing on something. It can be even more challenging if there's tension between them or if they are separated by distance. But parents and caregivers must get on the same page about discipline because adolescents need consistent messages. Work together to decide which strategies and approaches will work best for your children. Having trouble getting on the same page? Start with this piece, [Get on the Same Page About Discipline](#). Then, commit to work together towards your mutual goal of raising a happy, healthy child. One strategy for agreement is to build an [Adolescent Responsibility Contract](#). These contracts can be developed together at home or online by two parents across the globe due to separation, divorce, incarceration or [military service](#).

Monitoring Effectively

Effective monitoring is about knowing what is going on in our children's lives, not about the questions asked. Learn how to [be the kind of parent with whom children choose to share their lives](#). While you could track their phone to know where they are, you won't know what they're doing there. What they are feeling or experiencing. Or what struggles or pressures they are grappling with. Only an open line of communication with your adolescent will tell you these things.

Allowing for Mistakes

Adolescents are “superlearners” that must stretch their boundaries because the best learning happens at the edges. As parents, we cannot let them stray beyond the boundaries of safety and [morality](#). We must allow them to make mistakes, so they can learn how to recover. When they do, their decision-making skills improve. One of the toughest questions in parenting involves knowing [when to jump in and protect and when to get out of the way](#) to let life teach its lessons. Learning this key lesson both [prepares and protects](#).

Being Clear and Firm

Adolescents do whatever it takes to get as much time, attention, and feedback as they can. They learn whether that attention comes from being well behaved or from dragging us into nagging and hostile cycles of communication. Break unhealthy cycles of communication by checking out: [How Effective Discipline Strengthens Families: Avoiding a Dysfunctional Communication Cycle](#). And remember to nourish your relationship by [spending high quality time](#) together.

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Slideshow

Effective Discipline Strategies

Discipline isn't always easy. Here are key principles to keep in mind to ensure teens learn lessons and follow rules.

Slideshow

Set Clear Limits

Limits should ensure safe and moral behavior, while also allowing children to stretch, make mistakes and learn lessons.

Slideshow

Expand Limits

Allow children to broaden limits one step at a time. They are more likely to succeed when new privileges are earned through demonstrating responsible behavior.

Slideshow

Make Rules About Safety

Rules are more likely to be followed when it is clear they are established to keep children safe.

Slideshow

Relate Consequences to Actions

Offer consequences that make sense in light of the offense.

Engaging Adolescents as Partners

Building a comprehensive approach to discipline doesn't just involve those responsible for disciplining. It is also important that we engage our teens as partners in the discipline process. We must have clear rules and expectations for our adolescents. So that they understand the purpose of discipline and feel in control of their destiny. One way to ensure they feel in control is to allow their privileges and

responsibilities to expand over time. This prepares them to be responsible, self-sufficient young adults.

Development occurs over time. Responsibility develops a step-at-a time. Partner with your children to develop their growing sense of self and [morality](#). One strategy for partnering with your adolescent is to work together to develop an [Adolescent Responsibility Contract](#). This maps out expectations and how they can regain privileges and responsibilities back. It will serve as great motivation for them to do the right thing. Our Youth Advisory Board board has developed a [prep sheet](#) — share it with your teens to help prepare them!

DOWNLOAD THE PDF

Sample Adolescent Responsibility Contract

A sample agreement allowing for effective discipline and teen growth.

Honoring Adolescents' Intelligence

All of our work to become effective disciplinarians will be for naught unless we learn to deliver information in ways adolescents will understand. We must help our tweens and teens learn to make their own wise decisions. When we tell kids what to do or warn or lecture them, we push them away. Sometimes we even push them towards the very decisions we fear.

There are better ways to get a lesson across. Honor their intelligence and facilitate them to make wise decisions. This is about adjusting the way in which ideas are delivered to match their stage of development. It's also about delivering messages in a calm manner. Read these pieces to learn more:

- [Why Lectures Backfire](#)
- [Why Understanding How Teens Think is Key to Knowing How to Talk to Them](#)

Disciplining in Crisis

Sometimes discipline isn't about planning ahead. It's about reacting to a real crisis. How parents react to crises makes a difference in how their children weather crises. In those moments where we are truly tested, it's critical not to lose an effective tool in our tool box — unwavering love. Handle the situation effectively by reminding yourself why you are reacting so strongly. It's because of the depth of your love.

The most protective force in your adolescent's life moving forward is your voice in their head — telling them you love them and that you expect them to make wise decisions and healthy choices. Your child must never feel that your relationship is damaged beyond repair. Make it clear that there is [always a path to regain your trust](#).

This is Critical Work!

Parents shape their children from the day they are born. We give them the security that comes from our unconditional love, and the ability to navigate the world that comes from our guidance. When we approach discipline wisely, we build their self-control and inner motivation to do the right thing.

Continue adding strategies to your discipline toolbox and become the kind of parent that teaches the lessons tweens and teens need to make smart decisions in the future.