

4 Secrets To Set Boundaries with Teens that Succeed

Proverbs 29:17 - "Discipline your children, and they will give you peace; they will bring you the delights you desire."

I don't know if this boundary stuff really works for me," Jill told me (Dr. Townsend). She was having problems with her 14-year-old daughter. Holly was skipping classes at school and had been caught drinking. Things were definitely headed in the wrong direction, and Jill wanted to act before it was too late.

"What happened?" I asked. "Well, I sat down and told her, 'Things are going to have to change around here. I'm going to set some boundaries with you. This is for your own good. You need to stop the ditching and drinking.'"

"What happened then?" "She got mad at me, yelled, and left the room. The next weekend she was drinking again. I guess the next step is to send her to some adolescent rehab center—"

"Slow down, Jill. That may be in the cards, but you're ahead of yourself. I don't think you've given Holly or yourself a real go in setting boundaries. Boundaries aren't about just giving someone their marching orders and then expecting them to salute. Especially teens."

Jill had thought that simply being direct and honest was all that was needed to set boundaries. But it isn't.

There are four necessary principles that must be used in order make boundaries succeed in difficult situations:

Principle #1 – Love: I Am on Your Side Always begin with love. To the best of your ability, convey to your teen (or anyone else) that you care about her welfare and have her best interests at heart. Boundaries separate people, at least at first. Because of this, setting boundaries often causes conflict. Teens get mad and feel persecuted. They resist boundaries, because boundaries seem harsh and uncaring. Love will help your teen hear what you are saying, accept the boundaries, and tolerate the consequences. This is true for all of us. When we hear hard truths from someone who cares about us, we need to know that the person is on our side. Otherwise, we are liable to feel hated, bad, worthless, unloved, offended, or victimized. Those feelings don't lead to a happy ending. To demonstrate love to your teen, tell her something like this: "I am on your side. I am not doing this because I'm mad, or want to punish you, or don't care about you. I am doing this because I want your best." You may not be feeling especially close to your teen when you set a limit, but love is greater than momentary feelings. Love is a stance, an attitude to take: you are on your teen's side and for her good.

Principle #2 – Truth: I Have Some Rules and Requirements Love opens the door to change but is not enough. Truth provides guidance, wisdom, information, and correction. Truth exists in the form of rules, requirements, and expectations for your teen. They are the dos and don'ts that spell out what your teen needs to do and what he needs to avoid. Why is this important? Because your teen needs to know what the line is, so that he can choose whether or not to cross it. If there is no line, you won't be able to blame your teen for crossing it. Sometimes a boundary doesn't work because the parent didn't clearly define the boundary. By the way, if you feel weird or mean about having rules and expectations for your teens, you should see that feeling as a problem! It is not cruel and unloving for parents to have requirements for their teen's behavior and attitude. Teens who have reasonable expectations for their behavior tend to do better in life, because boundaries are part of life. Adults can't show up for work late, nor should they yell at their spouse when they've had a bad day. As long as the rules are appropriate for the situation, when you bring them into the relationship, you are helping your child see that structure and responsibility are normal and expected in life. Don't get mad. Get clear. Let your adolescent know what is expected and required in behavior and attitude. Write down your rules and regulations and post them on the refrigerator. Otherwise, when he feels you are being unfair in your discipline, he may be right.

Principle #3 – Freedom: You Can Choose to Respect or Reject the Rules Your teen has probably exercised freedom to make some poor choices, and you haven't seen much good come from that. But freedom is absolutely necessary, for a couple of reasons: First, you can't really make your teen choose the right thing. It can be scary to realize this, but realize it you must. There is a lot you can't control in your teen. You aren't present for much of her life, so you can't control what she does in school and with her friends. Nor can you really control what she does at home, if you think about it. Second, even if you could "make" your teen do the right thing, it wouldn't help him develop into a mature, loving, responsible person. That is not how God designed the growth process. He orchestrated things so that we must be free to choose good or bad, to choose him or reject him. That is the only way we can learn from our mistakes, and the only way we can truly love each other from the heart. Of course, freedom has a limit. If a problem is life-threatening or dangerous, you certainly should intervene. Intervention in the form of involuntary hospitalizations, arrests, or residential treatment programs sometimes has to happen in extreme cases. You want your child alive to be able to grow. But as much as possible, affirm and protect your teen's freedom.

Principle #4 – Consequences: Here Is What Will Happen Teens need consequences, because that's how they experience a fundamental law of life: good behavior brings good results and bad behavior brings uncomfortable results. Depending on the situation, your teen may need to experience something small, such as having to do extra chores at home. Or the consequence may need to be a big deal, such as grounding for a long time with few privileges. But the idea is the same: consequences teach us how to be responsible. Consequences should be both said and done. Your teen needs to know what will happen on the other side of the line. If you state consequences without enforcing them, you will train your teen to ignore you, because your bark has no bite.

The next time you decide you need to have a boundary-setting conversation, be sure you say:

Love – “I love you and am on your side.”

Truth – “I have some rules and requirements for your behavior.”

Freedom – “You can choose to respect or reject these rules.”

Consequences – “Here is what will happen if you reject these rules.”

When you use these four principles, you are providing the stability, clarity, and motivation your teen needs to begin to learn self-control and responsibility.

-This devotional is drawn from the book, [Boundaries with Teens](#), by Dr. John Townsend.