



## **Teen Rules: Safety Net Or Butterfly Net?**

By Thelma Dirkes

### **All children want and need limits...**

although they'll never admit it. It's pretty basic and yet very complex. Without limits, kids feel insecure. Limits give children a sense of safety, knowing they can only go so far. It makes them feel like part of a protective whole - a member of a unit or family. *If they don't sense this "invisible safety net", they'll fling themselves outward, blindly searching for the safe boundaries of the net.*

They don't exactly know what this safety net looks like or feels like. They're not even sure they want it. Sometimes the net will suddenly touch them, but teens will then feel trapped and begin to fight their way out of the safety zone.

*This is when it really gets COMPLEX.*

### **The most common concern for parents of teens is applying family rules or a safety net.**

Teens are determined to pick and choose which rules they'll follow. They make these decisions based on the level of importance of the rules, how the rules compare to those of their peers, and how the rules affect their personal level of comfort & satisfaction. They don't want to feel trapped in a butterfly net!

### **How can we make rules feel safe and worthwhile?**

- You can't tell your teen to stop smoking, but you can tell her not to smoke in your house.
- You can't tell your teen to stop drinking excessively, but you can prevent him from using your car while the problem exists.
- You can't physically force your teen to go to school, but you can limit privileges to just the basic needs while they're out of school.
- Are they still valid or applicable?
- Reward your teens for responsible behavior.
- Adjust or eliminate rules and/or add privileges.
- Add new rules as needed but maintain a workable balance.

Work on just a few rules at a time. As children develop more skills, what's natural is to loosen the reins by reducing limits. But with teens, our tendency is to tighten the reins and apply more rules.

*"It's an awful world out there and we don't want them to experience any of it!"*

The results are unhappy teenagers and very unhappy parents. It's hard to let go because kids can get hurt, miss out, or worse yet, fail. Failure is not an option because if they fail, you fail! Then everyone will **know** you failed! So you get angrier because your kids have succeeded in making you look and feel like **failures**. Does this sound familiar?

Let some of your rules go, including some of the big ones. Give yourself and your teen a chance to succeed.

Apply rules and consequences that are enforceable and realistic...

...ones that you can control and directly affect **you**.

These are rules and consequences that you can actually apply and monitor.

Involve your teens in developing family rules and consequences.

Allow them to practice their communication, negotiation, and compromising skills. Be willing to listen to their side without judgment so that they can learn to listen to you. Then when rules and consequences are applied, parents won't have to take the full blame. After all, the kids took part in creating them too.

Re-visit family rules on a regular basis.

Be clear about what's negotiable and what's non-negotiable.

For example: curfew can be negotiable if the teen demonstrates responsible practices or if a particular situation warrants it. But rules related to physical violence or unsafe practices are definitely non-negotiable.

Consistently follow-through with rules and consequences.

If the consequence for a weeknight curfew violation is a reduction in the teen's weekend allowance - then do it. If the consequence for unsafe driving practices is withdrawing the use of the car - then take the keys! Failure to follow-through with consequences invalidates the rule and only gives the teen permission to challenge other family rules.

Avoid getting into an argument with your teen when applying a rule or consequence.

Once you get started, it can open the door to an unpleasant, power play. It then becomes the survival of the most "persistent and talkative". Who will back-down first?

Use a "broken-record" technique. When your teen argues, keep repeating with empathy: "I'm sorry this is upsetting you, but those are the rules (or consequences) we agreed on."

If your teen keeps escalating, give yourself permission to leave the room. Go to the bathroom and lock the door behind you. Leave the house and take a walk. Whatever you do, do not engage in a verbal battle because you're older and you will most likely get tired and give-in before your energetic teen does.

Be prepared for things to get worse before they get better.

Prepare yourself with lots of positive self-talk and self-care tools. Be kind to yourself and your teen as you weave your safety net together. Good luck!