



Setting Limits and Monitoring Behavior to Prevent Substance Use

Many parents find it challenging to set effective boundaries. They worry that it could build a wall between them and their teen. In truth, setting limits shows you care. The tricky part is finding a balance between your need for control and your teen's need for independence.

Get started

Everyone is different. Some teens need a lot of structure to be successful; others don't. Depending on your teen's personality and routine, consider setting limits that let them know:

- What they can and can't do after school.*
- When they have to do homework.
- When they can use the computer and what it can be used for.
- When they can have a phone and how it can be used.
- What types of technology and apps they can use and how.
- When they're allowed to go out and with whom.
- When they can drive or ride in a car with friends.

*This is prime time for experimenting with substances. Having an adult around during these hours is one of the most effective ways to prevent substance use.

Work together

Teens are much more likely to obey rules and limits that they help to create. Work with your teen to figure out what you both can live with. Be open-minded about their needs and desires — and crystal clear about yours. Ensure that the rules are age-appropriate and adjust them as your child grows older or demonstrates that they can take on more. Remember, each rule or limit has to:

- Work for both of you. If your child has an after-school job, setting a rule that says homework has to be done by dinnertime isn't practical. Neither is giving them until 8pm. Find a middle ground.
- Have clear expectations. Saying, "Be civil to people" is vague. Saying, "Don't yell, swear, hit or break things" spells out what you expect.

Include consequences

There needs to be a price for stepping over the line. Otherwise, why would anyone pay attention to limits? Let your teen help you define the consequences. Here are a few questions to keep in mind as you go:

- Does the punishment fit the crime? Grounding for a week may be too harsh when they're 20 minutes late for dinner, but reasonable when curfew was missed by two hours.
- Can you enforce the consequence? If your teen stays home alone while you work a night shift, saying they have to be in bed by 8pm isn't very enforceable.
- Is the consequence clear? Saying, "If you miss curfew, you can't use the car" is vague. Saying, "For every 30 minutes you're late, you lose your right to use the car for one day" makes the cost clear.

As a wrap up, make sure you're both on the same page. Ask your teen to review each limit and consequence out loud with you. You may even want to put the details in writing.

Enforce limits & acknowledge success

All teens make mistakes. That's how they learn. And when your teen does, you're bound to be upset.

Try to keep emotions in check. Avoid making empty threats or you'll lose credibility. Take time to cool off, then calmly explain your disappointment, anger or frustration (your feelings can be a very powerful motivator). Most importantly, remember your agreement — only enforce the consequences you talked about, no surprises.

When things are going well — which will be most of the time — be sure to let them know. Everyone likes a pat on the back, a word of thanks or a compliment. When the majority of the things you say to your child is negative, each message carries less and

less weight and gets less attention. Imagine the effect when a negative message is a *rare* occurrence.

Monitor behavior

The idea of “monitoring” may sound sinister, but it’s actually a very simple idea that leads to great things: knowing where your child is, knowing their friends and knowing what they’re up to.

By staying in-the-know about your child’s daily routines, you’re taking an important step in preventing substance use. Kids who are not regularly monitored are four times more likely to use drugs than kids who are.

Being monitored can conflict with your child’s desire and need for independence. But you also have a need to protect and ensure their safety. Finding a balance is possible. It helps to explain that knowing their daily activities and whereabouts isn’t about control, but about ensuring safety and staying involved.

The most important time of day to monitor is after school. Kids are at the greatest risk for using substances during these hours. Look into any adult-supervised after-school activities they can take part in during these hours. Encourage involvement in activities like art or music programs, clubs or organized sports. Follow up with your child and adult supervisors or coaches to check on their participation and stay involved.

Rules of Monitoring

1. Know where your teen is at all times — physically and virtually.

Keep tabs on your child’s internet and social media use by using web browser tools and software designed to block certain sites. Make sure they know you’re asking out of love, not because of a lack of trust. Concerns about their privacy can be addressed in an open and honest conversation, where you can clearly say that monitoring is meant only to help protect them from harm, not to be nosy or intrusive.

2. Get to know your kids’ friends — both online and off.

Find subtle ways to “drop in” when their friends are at your house. Offering a snack is usually a good way to enter a conversation. And, while you’re at it, get to know your child’s friends’ parents, too. Get together with the parents to discuss your children and any recent incidents related to alcohol or other drugs in your community. It can also help to know who they are connecting with online and which influencers they follow.

3. Find out how your teen plans to spend his or her day.

Looking for something to discuss during dinner? This is a great one. “So...what are you planning to do tomorrow that you’re excited about?” Ask questions before they leave the house. Find out where they’re going, who will be there and what they’ll be doing. Check in while they’re out. Call to say hello and include a reminder of your expectations for each other. Ask questions (without interrogating) about what they did while they were out when they get home. Make eye contact and notice any smells in their hair or on clothing that could indicate alcohol or marijuana use.

4. Limit the time your child spends without adult supervision.

After-school hours are a risky time for tweens or teens to be on their own. If you or another adult you trust can’t be home with your child, explore after-school programs. If that’s not possible, try to check in on your child periodically when they’re home alone.

5. Know the apps and other technology your teen is using — and use it yourself.

Pay attention to the types of social media and other apps your child is using and make sure they are using them within established limits and guidelines that you’ve set. Know their passwords and scan their apps from time to time to check for unhealthy or unsafe activity.

6. Know how much money your child has and how that money is spent.

If they have a lot of cash on hand, access to vapes, alcohol or other substances is easier. Have your child bring you receipts for any purchases made or use a debit card where you can see where and when they use it.

When rules are clear, fair and communicated effectively, and backed by explanations that are steeped in love and care, those rules are more likely to be respected and followed by teens.

If substance use is suspected...

When substance use is suspected, and even once it’s confirmed, it’s useful to keep records of everything that concerns you over time – the date, time, where it occurred, what was found, and changes over time. Your child may try to convince you that things didn’t happen the way you remember, or that the things you found are not what you think they are. In the event it becomes necessary to seek outside help, your notes will provide invaluable information.

- When did substance use begin?
- How did it start? / How did they get it?
- Did it progress to other substances?
- Who are your child's friends? And their parents?
- Who is in your child's online social network?
- Who are frequent contacts on their phone? If you cannot look on their phone, look at the monthly bill and note unfamiliar numbers.
- Note occasions when they come home late and who they're hanging out with.
- Track the number of prescription pills in your home.
- Anything suspicious found in their room or among their belongings?
- Any drug-related terms or slang in text messages or other communications?

If you do find substance use and aren't sure what to do next, reach out to us for support. We can help you figure out an action plan and point you to resources other families have used that are helpful in dealing with teen substance use.

<https://drugfree.org/article/setting-limits-and-monitoring-behavior/>