



Lepage Associates
Solution-Based Psychological Services

Limits, Consequences, and Follow Through For Teen Substance Use

“Your teen *will* be offered drugs and alcohol at times throughout his or her middle school and high school years, *even if your teen does not seek them out*. In these situations it will be of tremendous help to your teen’s decision making if you have set clear limits, and if your teen can predict with certainty that when you set limits, you then enforce consequences when those limits are broken,” advises Dr. Tina Lepage, a licensed clinical psychologist who has worked with teens across the spectrum of alcohol and drug use. She continues, “Many parents struggle with setting appropriate limits for their teens, determining appropriate consequences when teens break the rules, and following through on enforcing consequences. Particularly given the dangers inherent in alcohol and drug use by teens, it behooves parents to prepare themselves with these skills.”

The earlier these limits are set, the easier the parent’s job will be. If firm limit setting is not your area of strength, here are three resources: 1. [Positive Discipline for Teenagers: Empowering Your Teen and Yourself Through Kind and Firm Parenting](#), Nelsen, J. Lott L 2. [Setting Limits: How to Raise Responsible, Independent Children by Providing Clear Boundaries](#), MacKenzie, R.J. 3. [Parenting Your Out-of-Control Teenager: Seven Steps to Re-establish Authority and Reclaim Love](#), Cells, S.P.. Also, we recommend that you seek out a therapist skilled in teen limit setting.

Linda Hammock, a licensed professional counselor and certified addictions counselor, added the following advice, “One of our most important parenting jobs now that our children are teens is to set the rules and apply consequences when they choose not to honor them. That doesn’t mean we don’t expect them to ignore our rules from time to time and test those limits. In fact, it is more likely that they will! In reality, messing up provides really important learning experiences. It forces them to be accountable by experiencing the consequences of their poor decisions and the rewards of their good decisions. *It is the rules we set and whether we hold them accountable to them*, which communicate our values and teach our kids how we believe they need to take care of themselves.

One of the challenges our progressive community faces is that there are no community norms around our teens’ behavior. There is no agreement as to whether kids should be using substances or not, there is no agreement as to what time is an appropriate curfew, there is no agreement about what level of supervision teens need or where they should be allowed to hang out. This forces each individual family to figure it out alone.” The boxes accompanying this article are a starting point to think about limits and consequences for supervision, substance use, curfew, and car riding.

1703 Legion Road, Suite 204

Chapel Hill, NC 27517

website: www.lepageassociates.com ❖ [919] 933-5355 ❖ e-mail: tlepage@lepageassociates.com

Written contracts. Every family needs to develop their own set of expectations, rules, privileges, and consequences. It is much more effective if the six (or less) most important rules are written in the form of a contract with everyone's signature.

Linda Hammock comments, *"I consistently recommend that parents choose Zero Tolerance for substance use as their number 1 rule.* However, the parents choose the rules, the teen and parents negotiate the consequences and privileges that are most meaningful and motivating to them. Written contracts that clearly state the rules, the consequences and the rewards up front are helpful. Each rule should state a concrete goal, when and how often it will be monitored, a specific consequence for non-compliance and a specific reward or privilege for compliance. We all too often take compliance for granted and forget to validate it.

Changes to the contract should only be made in family meetings with everyone present and calm...no reactive decisions in the heat of a conflict. A contract enables parents to stay calmer when the teen makes poor choices because the tough decisions are already made. The parent's entire job becomes implementing the rewards and consequences consistently."

Privileges. Parents today have much more power than they use. Parents are in charge of many privileges that can be earned for appropriate behavior. *Too often parents forfeit their control by giving their teens the message that they are entitled privileges without the responsible behavior that should be expected.*

The opportunity to earn privileges is an excellent technique that can be used by every family. Even if you can financially afford to indulge your teen, doing so is a disservice. The world will not be so kind. Here are some privileges that can be awarded for responsible behavior and removed for irresponsibility:

- Cell phone
- Phone
- Allowance
- Management of one's own money
- Parental signature on work permit
- Transportation to a job
- Overnight stays at your house or at another teen's home
- Friends visiting
- TV use
- Computer use
- Weekend and evening social activities
- Privacy. Yes, this should be earned with trustworthy behavior! Untrustworthy behavior can result in random searches of your teen's belongings. (This is not a violation of privacy if teens are making decisions that put them at risk when you are still responsible for them.)
- Parental signature for off-campus lunch
- Use of car to and from school
- School parking space
- Gas in the car
- Transportation for social events
- Use of a parent's car
- Parental coverage of teen on family car insurance

Consequences and Follow Through. Dr. Tina Lepage provided the following thoughts on how parental follow-through on consequences helps their teen to make good decisions. “Utilize immediate consequences for inappropriate behaviors of any kind, and stronger consequences for behaviors that are considered highly problematic, typically such as behaviors related to safety issues (drug and alcohol use, physical aggression, threats of violence, driving without a license, etc.). It is best if a teen has learned over the years that his or her parent(s) give immediate consequences when rules are disobeyed, and has learned that some rules (the ‘safety issues’) evoke a very high consequence. *Then when confronted with the decision of whether or not to use drugs and alcohol, the teen knows from experience that if caught, he or she will be saddled with a very large consequence. This makes it less likely for a teen to make the initial choice to use.*

It is a cost-benefit analysis for the teen, and parents should realize that the perceived benefits to teens may be many, such as looking cool in front of their peers, fitting in with peers, trying something new and daring, relief of boredom, ‘feeling good’ from the high, etc., and those ‘benefits’ are experienced immediately. Thus the teen must also know that the costs will be many and immediate as well.”

Please refer to the four boxes for additional strategies for parents; each box contains suggestions of ways to approach your child on a few key issues and some ideas about words you can use:

Supervision

- If you are spending the night, going to a party or social event or spending a teacher workday at another friend’s house, I will need to speak to the adult in charge to make sure an adult will be home.
- I will not go out of town and leave you and this home unsupervised.
- If you plan to have friends over to our home, please check with me first.
- If you are having friends over to our house when I am not home, here are the conditions:
- I need to have a parent’s name and phone number for each of your friends who is visiting or spending the night in our home.

Substance Use

- Drugs and underage alcohol use are not allowed in this house.
- I am the adult paying for this home, and I am legally responsible for anything that happens here - whether I am home or not. Parents in this community have been prosecuted for permitting use of illegal substances in their homes, as well as legal substances by underage persons.
- I am going to trust that you understand the seriousness of this and that you would not want to put our family at risk by violating my trust.
- If you do violate my trust and I find evidence of illegal substances in this house, I will call all parents (if friends are here) immediately no matter what time of the day or night.
- I will then call the police narcotics officer to meet with us and discuss the seriousness of your actions.
- I always have the right to search your room.
- If I suspect you are using drugs or alcohol, you will be expected to participate in a substance abuse assessment with a professional.

Curfews

- I will set the curfew based on your age and the level of responsibility you show in honoring your curfew.
- I expect you to be home by the time of your curfew.
- If unforeseen circumstances delay you past your curfew, I expect you to call before your curfew.
- Changes in your curfew will occur gradually, in a step-by-step fashion, as you demonstrate compliance with the current curfew.
- “Nothing worth doing happens after midnight.” The primary things that happen after midnight often involve sex, alcohol, drugs, illegal activity, or rebellion of some kind.

For older, responsible high school students 12:30 am (which is really midnight but allows 30 minutes for dropping off friends and transportation) is our upper limit curfew recommendation. Our community norm is much later at this time, so most of our teens will not think this curfew is reasonable. We are responsible, however, for determining the community norms, and only we can change them.

Car Riding

- You are absolutely not to get in a car with anyone who:
 - Has had any drug or even a drop of alcohol in his/her system. (This includes marijuana, which does affect eye/hand coordination and speed of reaction - contrary to teenage myths.)
 - Isn't a licensed and safe driver.
 - Does not have a seat belt space for you.
 - Has other passengers without seat belts.
- You need to have the gumption to ask the driver to reduce speed or anything else necessary to be a safe driver or to let you out of the car.
- If you ever need a ride because you or another driver are not able to drive safely, you may call me at anytime of the day or night to get a ride, no matter where you are - no questions asked.
- Your safety is what is most important to me!

Most parents need support with this process. For more information consult *Parent Power Prevents Substance Abuse Before It Starts* on www.chhsptsa.org

Tina Lepage, Psy.D., Licensed Clinical Psychologist
Linda Hammock, LPC, CAC
Lynne Johnston, LCSW, Parent and Parent Educator

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Lepage Associates is a family practice serving children, teenagers, and adults; we provide therapy, evaluation, and consultation. Several of our Associates have expertise in the assessment and treatment of substance abuse in teenagers and in adults. Please visit our website, or call us for a free consult:

www.lepageassociates.com
(919) 572-0000