



EFFECTIVE MONITORING:

Make Your Rules about Safety, Not Control

As our children grow into young adults, they struggle to become independent. They have to prove to themselves that they can stand on their own two feet. They can become resentful when they believe their parents are getting in the way of their independence. Therefore, they are very sensitive to being “controlled.”

On the other hand, they appreciate parents caring about their safety. This teaches us that it is very important to frame our guidance in terms of safety rather than as anything they can interpret as “control.”

To keep our kids safe, we need to monitor them. This means knowing whom our children are spending time with, where they are going, what they are doing and when they will return. The challenge is to create rules and boundaries that keep them safe without making them believe that our goal is to be controlling. They will be more likely to follow our rules if they understand that we make them because we love them and care about their safety.



● WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- > **It is normal for teens to spend more time with their peers than their families.**
- > **What we know about a teen’s activities comes from what he or she decides to share.**
- > **Teens are more willing to talk about their activities with their parents** if they have a warm relationship with them. Teens want to feel that their parents listen to them rather than judge them.
- > **Teens understand that caring parents are involved** with their safety and in charge of helping them figure out how to get along in society (e.g. following the law).
- > **Teens do not think parents should control their personal lives.** They think we should stay away from interfering with their friendships, how they dress, and how they spend their free time. They do understand that when it affects safety, parents can give input and set rules that might affect their personal lives.
- > **Fighting with your teen can feel awful but it isn’t always bad.** It means that your teen still thinks it is worth it to make their case. Arguing is far better than when teens stop talking altogether.
- > **Teens are more likely to tell their parents what is going on in their personal lives if their parents are flexible.**
- > **Parents can try to listen and think about their teen’s points.** When teens feel that they are being listened to, they keep talking.

● WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARENTS

> **Make your rules very clear so your child understands how you expect them to act.**

> **First, agree on rules with your spouse or partner.** Then, talk about these rules with your child and allow for back-and-forth communication about the rules.

- *“Now that you have your license, your Mom and I would like to talk about some ground rules.”*
 - > *“Why? I have a license so I can drive on my own.”*
- *“We are proud you got a license. But our job is to make sure you stay safe, so we will have rules in place until you have a lot of driving experience.”*
 - > *“Well, how do I know you are ever going to trust me?”*
- *“First, it just takes time to gain experience. Nobody can do it without practice. But then your job is to drive safely and prove how responsible you are in the car. We promise to notice and to give you more driving privileges when you’ve proven you’re ready.”*

> **Be clear that rules exist because you care about your child’s safety** NOT because you want to control them and NOT because you want to get involved in their personal business.

- **Don’t say:** *“You are not allowed to drive with your friends.”* (Teens will think, “Why do you hate my friends!”)
 - > **Instead say:** *“I care about your safety, and teen passengers distract new drivers, so you can’t drive with passengers until you have had at least 6 months of driving experience. I like your friends so in the meantime I am happy to drive you all wherever you want to go.”*
- **Don’t say:** *“I don’t trust those kids; they are a bad influence on you.”*
 - > **Instead say:** *“I worry about you going to a house where parents aren’t home. Things might get out of hand and that becomes a safety issue.”*

> **Explain to your child that rules are flexible and will change** if and when he shows that he is dependable and capable of increased responsibility.

- *“For now your curfew is at 9:30 pm. Your Dad and I are open to giving you a later curfew if and when you can show us that you can really handle staying out until 9:30. That means that all of your work is getting done, you are getting enough sleep, we always know where you are, and of course, that you continue to stay out of trouble.”*

> **Be open to talking about making changes to the rules, but never give in if safety is at stake.**

- Your teen might try to argue about changing a rule, especially if you have been flexible in the past with other rules. However, **never** yield on a rule that has to do with safety!
- **Don’t say:** *“I don’t think you can handle this, and what I say goes.”*
 - > **Instead say:** *“I hear that you want to stay in the hotel with your friends after prom. I love your friends and I trust your judgment. You are proving more every day that you are growing up. But I can’t let you take this chance right now because I know that there might be a lot of drinking there. I am worried about your safety, so this rule is not negotiable.”*



One of the best ways to protect your teen is to make rules and boundaries about safety, not control. By making it clear that rules exist because you care about their safety, your teen will be less likely to rebel and more likely to follow house rules. Let your teen know that all rules are open to discussion and can change if and when he shows you that he can handle more responsibility. However, never give in to changing a rule if your child's safety is at stake.

SOURCES:

Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg with Martha Jablow (2011) *Building Resilience in Children and Teens*, American Academy of Pediatrics (www.fosteringresilience.com)

Dr. Judith Smetana (2011) *Adolescents Families and Social Development: How Teens Construct their Worlds*, Wiley-Blackwell (<http://www.amazon.com/Adolescents-Families-Social-Development-Construct/dp/1444332503>)

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MILITARY CHILD EDUCATION COALITION

909 Mountain Lion Circle | Harker Heights, Texas 76548 | 254.953.1923

www.MilitaryChild.org

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