



Parents Make A Difference!

Teens and Family Rules

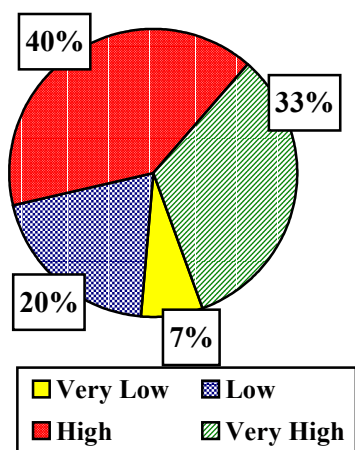
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In the fall of 2001, the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey was administered to 5,704 7th through 12th graders in 19 of the 31 school districts in southwest Wisconsin.

As part of the survey, a series of questions was asked that led to the creation of a parental rules scale. The higher the score on the parental rules scale, the more consistent teens reported their parents were with setting rules, communicating consequences, and following through with consequences when rules were broken.

Figure 1 shows that 73% of teens in southwest Wisconsin report experiencing consistent and fairly enforced rules at home. Twenty-seven percent (27%) report inconsistency in family rules and consequences.

Parental Rules Scale (Fig. 1)



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Teens who report their parents establish rules, clearly communicate consequences for breaking those rules, and consistently enforce those consequences are much less likely to have tried alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, and much less likely to have had sexual intercourse. The table below describes the percentage of teens that report never having tried smoking, never having tried alcohol, never having tried marijuana, and not having engaged in sexual intercourse for each of the categories of the parental rules scale.

	Very Low Parental Rules	Low Parental Rules	High Parental Rules	Very High Parental Rules
Never tried smoking	50%	55%	66%	75%
Never tried alcohol	26%	30%	44%	57%
Never tried marijuana	65%	72%	82%	89%
Have not had sex	57%	67%	76%	82%

Establishing Rules

When establishing rules, it is important that the members of the family affected by the rules have input into what those rules should be. When teens feel they have had a part in the process of establishing the rules, it is more likely that they will see the rules as being fair and they will be more likely to comply. For example, you, the parent, want to set a ten o'clock curfew on weekends. Rather than just telling your teen that the curfew is ten o'clock, start by letting him or her know you would like to discuss a weekend curfew. Explain the reasons you think a weekend curfew is important and then ask them what they think about the subject. They can then express their feelings about a curfew. This lets your teen know that you are interested in their thoughts and respect their ideas. It also sets the stage for you to negotiate a curfew policy you both can live with.

FAMILY RULES CHECKUP

- ★ Have family members had input into the rules affecting them?
- ★ Does everyone have a clear understanding of the rules?
- ★ Have you agreed on what the consequences are for breaking the rules?
- ★ Does everyone understand those consequences?
- ★ Do you, as the parent, follow through with the consequences when rules are broken?

Discipline During Stressful Family Times

When families are experiencing stress, like a divorce or move to a new town, sometimes parents are tempted to relax the rules a bit. Your energy may be elsewhere because you have the many demands on you, but maintaining your family rules is extremely important during times of stress. If suddenly your teen sees that you no longer care about the rules, he or she may interpret this as you not caring about him or her anymore. This could lead your teen to test the boundaries even more, to find out if you still do care.

Negotiable vs. Non-Negotiable Rules

You can place rules into two categories -- those that are negotiable and those that are not negotiable. Rules that are negotiable address issues that have to do with expected behaviors or tasks, like chores, telephone use, clothing, etc. Non-negotiable rules are those dealing with health and safety and strongly held family values, like alcohol or drug use, not solving problems through violence, etc. In the previous example, the curfew was negotiable. If you are willing to negotiate some of the rules, your teen will be more willing to accept the non-negotiable rules. A good rule of thumb is to negotiate as many of the rules you expect your teen to follow as possible so that they understand how important the non-negotiable rules are.

Let's Talk Consequences

Establishing the rules is only a first step. Next, you and your teen should have a clear understanding of what the consequences will be if the rules are broken. What are the consequences of breaking curfew? What are the consequences of engaging in smoking or drinking? These are things you need to work out with your teen **ahead of time** (grounding, taking away a privilege, doing extra chores, reporting school code violations to the school, etc.), so that when a rule is broken, there are no surprises about the consequences. You can negotiate consequences with your teen as well. **The most important thing about consequences is enforcing them.** If you don't follow through with what you and your teen have agreed on, all the work you have done to establish rules and consequences will not yield the results you want.

A Final Thought About Discipline

Keep in mind that discipline should be about helping teens grow into adults who are responsible for their own actions. Effective discipline is not about making a teen "pay" for misbehavior. Strive to teach your teen that every action has consequences and help him or her learn to accept those consequences gracefully.

Remember: Parents Make a Difference!

"Parents Make a Difference" is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS), a program of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, local school districts and UW-Platteville. This series is adapted from the UW-Extension "Whose Kids?...Our Kids!" series. This issue was written by Christina Kenney, UW-Extension Grant County, and edited by Ruth Schriefer and Deb Ivey UW-Extension Iowa County, and Tom Schmitz, UW-Extension Grant and Lafayette County. Thanks are extended to the 5,704 7th to 12th graders from southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2001 SWYS survey. Contact UW-Extension for further information: Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; and Iowa County (608) 935-0391.

More survey results on the web at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/grant/tap/parentresources.html>.