

# Handling Challenging Teen Behaviors



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**Creating house rules, boundaries and clear consequences for your teen and family makes avoiding negative behaviors easier for your teen**

The teenage years bring new opportunities into a young person's life. Getting a driver's license, working at a job, dating, thinking about college – these activities represent new freedom and responsibility. Teens commonly desire independence, so at times they may test family boundaries or demonstrate challenging behaviors. Those challenging behaviors can include yelling, not following house rules, fighting with siblings or not listening. These behaviors are very common and normal for most teens.

You also might find more serious challenging behaviors, such as drinking alcohol or using drugs, not going to school, stealing or other behaviors that put teens or someone else in danger. These challenging behaviors might need significant attention from the police, a mental health professional or social services worker (see the last page of this newsletter for places to call for further assistance). In this newsletter, we share some brief thoughts on creating a positive home atmosphere and managing challenging behaviors if they do occur.

## **Establishing Rules and Consequences**

Creating house rules, boundaries and clear consequences for your teen and family makes avoiding negative behaviors easier for your teen. When teenagers know what is expected of them, and what happens when they don't meet those expectations, they might be more motivated to follow rules and behave in your home. Talk openly with your teen about what you'd like the house rules to be and what will happen if the rules are broken.

Teens often think rules are unfair and complain or get upset if their behavior conflicts with such rules. To help your teens feel as though they have some input, invite them to assist in creating some of the rules and discussing appropriate consequences if the rules are not followed. Creating the rules and consequences as a family will make your teen feel included, important and encouraged to act in more positive ways. Having clear rules and consequences helps them turn down peer pressure and explain to others what they are and are not allowed to do.



# Tips for Handling Challenging Behaviors

Parents and caregivers have a variety of strategies they can use in handling challenging behaviors. You need to remember there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to managing children’s behavior, but rather that you must adapt different strategies to the personality of the child and the needs of the situation. Some strategies that may be useful are listed below.

- **Time Out** – If you and your teen have a heated conversation or exchange, spend a few minutes apart from your teen. Allow some time for both you and your teen to cool down. Assign him or her to spend 10 to 15 minutes alone in a room or working apart from each other on a project, then plan to come back together and discuss the behavior when the teen seems emotionally ready and more calm.
- **Get Active** – Encourage your teen to do a physical activity, such as jogging or some kind of exercise. Physical activity can assist teens to relieve any anger, stress or anxiety they are experiencing. It also can give them time to calm down and gain perspective on an issue.
- **Give Clear Consequences** – If a teen breaks family rules or engages in inappropriate behavior, give clear and immediate consequences. A consequence is a clear response to a particular behavior. A consequence needs to occur soon after a misbehavior (though not in anger). It should be something you can enforce, linked to the questionable behavior, and clear and firm. For example, if a teen stayed two hours late at a friend’s house instead of coming home as asked, a clear consequence would be a requirement to stay home for two straight days without any interaction with friends (including e-mail, etc.).
- **Provide Positive Alternatives** – Offer teenagers an incentive or positive alternative so they can avoid unpleasant consequences by behaving positively. For example, rather than punishing teenagers for not cleaning their room, you might offer a positive alternative such as permission to use the car for an evening as soon as they clean their room. The “positive alternative” or desired incentive you give should be controllable so you provide it only after the teen behaves as you have asked. This could include playing a particular video game or going out with friends.
- **Use the Written Word** – Use written words to communicate with each other about a topic. Rather than having an endless debate, each of you could write your feelings and desired behavior in an area in one page or less. Exchange your written thoughts and then each provide two to three ideas for resolving your disagreement.
- **Listen and Communicate** – Talk with your teens and find out what is going on in their life, but listen first. Ask questions about their day, such as, “Tell me the best part about your day” or “What did you learn today?” This will give you more than a “yes” or “no” answer. Listen at least twice as much as you talk. Listening and talking with your teens will make them feel more important and valued, which promotes positive behavior.
- **Celebrate Good Behavior** – Take time to express appreciation and celebrate your teens’ good behaviors or accomplishments. Let them know you are proud of them. Pick out the positive parts of your teens’ behavior and you will start seeing more and more positive things about them. Recognize the good things they do, and reassure them so they know you recognize and appreciate good behavior.
- **Know Your Teen’s Surroundings** – Stay connected with your teen’s friends and teachers, as well as the parents of friends. Know how your teen is doing in school. Connecting with teachers is a great way to help your teen. Also, knowing your teen’s friends allows you to know what your teen is doing. Invite the teen’s friends to your home every once in awhile and get to know them. This will give you a good idea of how your teen is doing and what he or she is doing. Be aware of where your teen is, who he or she is with and what he or she is doing.
- **Ask the Difficult Questions** – Don’t be afraid to ask your teens hard questions about alcohol, drugs, etc. This will let your teens know they can talk with you about anything, and it shows you care about them. Talking with your teen about difficult things can prevent some challenging behaviors. It allows you to share your values and teach teens about behaviors that can be problematic. Don’t allow your teen to think your silence on a subject is ignorance or lack of concern.
- **Ask for Help** – Ask other parents, friends or professionals for help or advice on how to handle challenging behaviors. At times, having another caring adult who is close to your teens to talk with them about their behavior may be appropriate. Also, you may have a need at times to ask for additional help and guidance from competent and qualified professionals.

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## Conclusion

If these suggestions are not working for your family, *seek additional help* through other resources. Valuable resources include your support systems, such as family, friends, neighbors and community professionals. Helpful information always is available in books, newsletters and classes, and through family counseling or therapy. Counseling can provide families with additional tools to overcome difficult times.

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## Helpful Phone Numbers

### North Dakota Helpline

211 or (800) 472-2911

Or call your local office of the NDSU Extension Service to find phone numbers for agencies that can assist you. Regional Parent Resource Centers also have information available to help provide phone numbers of other agencies to assist you.

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## Helpful Resources for Parents

The mental health associations or departments in each state can provide you with resources and locations of mental health professionals or answer questions you might have about your teen and challenging behaviors.

- Mental Health Association of North Dakota  
(479) 255-3692  
Web site: [www.mhand.org/](http://www.mhand.org/)
- Mental Health Association of Minnesota  
(612) 331-6840  
Web site: [www.mentalhealthmn.org/](http://www.mentalhealthmn.org/)
- Mental Health Association of Montana  
(406) 727-6642  
Web site: [www.mhamontana.org/](http://www.mhamontana.org/)
- Division of Mental Health South Dakota  
(605) 773-5991  
Web site: [www.state.sd.us/dhs/dmh/MentalHealthResources.htm](http://www.state.sd.us/dhs/dmh/MentalHealthResources.htm)

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## References

- Tralle, M. (2005). Parenting tools: Understanding children with challenging behaviors. University of Minnesota Extension Service. Retrieved from the Web on Feb. 6, 2006, at [www.extension.umn.edu/family/W00016.html](http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/W00016.html).
- Wentzel, J. (2005). Keep kids busy to avoid challenging behaviors. Retrieved from the Web on Feb. 6, 2006, at <http://library.adoption.com/parenting-teenagers/keep-kids-busy-to-avoid-challenging-behaviors/article/1666/1.html>.

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