

The Power of Providing Choices

When I tell other parents that I have never said "No" to my 13 year old son, they always shudder and wonder what a horribly spoiled child I have. Actually, I have a very respectful, responsible and mature 13 year old who understands the importance of making personal decisions.

It all started when he was just about a year old. I would ask him if he wanted to eat at the table or on the porch. He would know what the choices were and he would choose one of those options. As he approached what some people call the "terrible twos" (which I think back fondly on as the tremendous twos) David's choices were expanded to include whether he wanted to take a shower or a bath, wear sandals or sneakers or go to bed now or in five minutes. He has always been given the ability to make a lot of his own decisions. It has completely avoided him saying "NO!" to me.

As he is now approaching his teen years, he receives a weekly allowance of \$20. Many of my friends roll their eyes and think that is too much money for a 13-year old. But then I ask them how much they spend on movies, skating, food and other extracurricular activities on a weekly basis. That's when their eyes really go back in their heads. "I'm handing out money every time I turn around!" or "My teen-ager and I aren't on speaking terms right now because I had to tell her I wouldn't pay \$35 for her to go to a concert."

We don't have those kinds of discussions in my house. David knows that as long as he does his weekly chores, he will get his allowance and he is free to spend it on anything he wants. We talk together about what events are coming up and how he might want to consider saving a little each week to be able to purchase a more expensive item. David also knows that if he makes a choice, he is going to have to live with the consequences. I have overheard him many times telling his friends that he is out of money and can't participate in a fun activity that weekend. He understands that his own choices created those consequences and he is very thankful for being in control of his activities.

As you are considering how to make the life with your teenager easier and more tolerable, consider these suggestions:

1. Give your teen choices to encourage him/her to think through a situation.
2. Stick to your guns when a choice has been made and it turns out to provide negative consequences. ("You chose not to carry an umbrella today and I told you that I would not be able to pick you up if it were raining".)
3. Provide an allowance so that your teen can experience making his/her own financial decisions.
4. Encourage your teen to consider all the options. They will come to you and ask for your help ("I can't find my _____!") Help your teen come up with alternatives rather than simply solving the problem for him.
5. Praise, praise and more praise for making choices. Choices are a difficult thing. Even if you would not choose to make that same choice, allow your teen to experience the natural consequences of the choices that are made.
6. Cry with them when a negative consequence occurs ("Everyone laughed at my purple hair!") but resist the temptation to say "I told you so" or save them from the emotional pain of their choices.

Teens need to take the fall sometimes so that they can grow into resilient, respectful and responsible young adults who will not expect you to bail them out when they can't make the car payment or pay the rent. They appreciate you more as a parent when they can make their own choices and they will respect you more once they reach adulthood by preparing them for the world of choices that lies before them.

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