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Talking regularly with youth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs reduces their risk of using in the first place.

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Know! How to Ease The Challenges of Increased Freedom

A tip to share with parents on increasing students' independence and freedom at home:

It is normal and healthy for adolescents to seek increased independence as they grow and develop. It is also normal for parents to have a hard time letting go. Naturally, we worry about our children's health and safety and quite frankly, their ability to make good decisions. However, in order for our children to become mature, responsible, self-disciplined young people, we must loosen the reigns and allow them to make some decisions on their own, mistakes and all.

With that said, your freedom-seeking adolescent still needs your parental influence and the stability you provide. It is when parents allow more freedom than a child is ready to handle, or permit the wrong kind of freedom, that problems occur. Difficulties also arise when parents cling too tightly, not allowing children the freedom they need. Research tells us that children do best when they remain closely connected with their parents, yet are free to express their own thoughts and opinions.

The challenge for parents is in figuring out the right amount of freedom to give and when to give it.

Consider these tips in helping with that challenge:

Grant Independence in Stages: While age is important in deciding when and how much freedom to give, maturity and past performance are also key factors. Start small, permitting your child to make some decisions that don't entail major consequences. If done well, you may choose to increase your son or daughter's freedom a bit further. Regardless, you will gain a better sense of your child's maturity level and his/her decision-making skills.



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Set Clear Limits: Limits actually make children feel loved and more secure. They need and want to know what behavior is expected of them, especially as they are given additional freedoms. You don't want your child to assume that increased freedom on one thing necessarily means increased freedom on something else. Therefore, boundaries must be set and clearly known by your child.

Give Reasonable Choices: Choices make youth more open to guidance. For instance, instead of just saying, "No, you can't go to the party," include some options like, "You can't go the party, but you can have some friends over or I can drop you and some friends off at the movies."

Guide Their Thinking: Adolescents are more responsive when they feel you are trying to guide, not control them. Engage your child in conversation, listen carefully, and then ask questions to get your child thinking about the potential outcomes of his/her actions.

Mistakes and Consequences Should Be Embraced: Making mistakes and experiencing the consequences that go along with them can serve as the best learning tool of all for our children - so long as the stakes aren't too high and their health and safety aren't at risk. Teach your child how to step back, examine what may have gone wrong and encourage them to think about how different choices may have led to a more positive outcome. We must resist the temptation to make excuses for our children's poor choices or bail them out of difficult situations so that they may avoid the negative consequences. Children need to learn that every choice has a consequence, for better or worse, and they must be held accountable for their actions.

We must accept our children's desire and need for increased independence and freedom while still providing guidance and support. In doing so, we provide our adolescents the opportunity they need to learn from their mistakes, take personal responsibility for their actions and grow in both maturity and self-discipline.

Sources: Education.com: Freedom and Limits for Teens. Pam Lehman — Community Action Network, Feb. 2011. U.S. Department of Education: Independence – Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence.