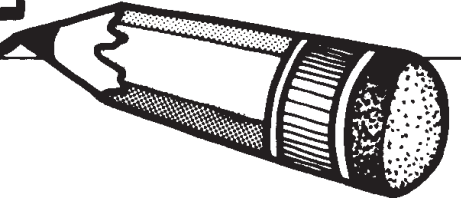


Parenting Pipeline



*A newsletter for parents of sixth-grade children
from the North Dakota State University Extension Service*



Becoming Independent

“Everyone Else Is Doing It!”

Preteen years are a time of contradictions. One moment the preteen is perfectly reasonable and the next moment you wonder who turned the world upside down. This is normal. Preteens are often characterized by rebellious and contradictory behavior. The rebellion is the child trying to become independent. It is not necessarily an act of total defiance directed toward parents.

But how much independence do parents give a preteen? Because children at this age are often irresponsible, because they do whatever seems good at the moment and because they are immature, parents are uncomfortable in letting go.

So what is too restrictive or too permissive? Family and community values help parents decide what is acceptable. Yet preteens receive pressure from their friends to try all kinds of things.

Being fair in setting limits becomes very important. Parents need to ask themselves why they don't want their preteen doing what her friends are doing. Often parents fear they will lose control over their child. Parenting, however, involves guiding the preteen to develop responsible behavior. Control seldom accomplishes this and further sets the stage for teenage rebellion. (Control refers to giving a direct order without providing the child with a reason or allowing opportunities to negotiate.) Controlling parents contribute to more rebellious behavior, not less.

Parents need to closely examine their own behavior, too. Telling a preteen not to do something even though the parent does it may demonstrate inconsistency and promote rebellion.

Preteen years are an important time for children to begin developing responsible behavior. Parenting is a little like cultivating a garden – it takes time, patience and diligence to reap the benefits. Parents are still powerful forces even though preteens appear not to listen or care.

There are no hard and fast rules about developing a responsible, independent preteen. Unfortunately, parents can't just suddenly take a preteen and say, “OK, you're old enough now – be responsible!”

Here are some examples of appropriate ways of involving preteens in the responsibilities of family life. Of course, no one preteen would be expected to assume all of these duties.

1. Read stories to younger siblings.
2. Help clean house and garage areas.

3. Respect others' property.
4. Run own errands.
5. Mow lawn.
6. Help adults do the family errands.
7. Help clean the bathroom with child-safe cleaning products.
8. Schedule ample time for homework.
9. Do paper route, pet sitting or some other job.
10. Provide care and do clean-up for family pets.

It is wise to proceed gradually. Through friendly discussions, an adult and a preteen together can determine responsibilities and accept independence.

When preteens experience satisfaction as a result of accomplishing tasks or making decisions, it helps to build a healthy self-esteem and a responsible, independent person.



Seeking Independence and Maintaining Open Communication

A father with a preteen son tells this story:

One day my son told my wife, "Dad doesn't love me anymore." That was a real shock to me and made me stop to think. I realized that I had been on my son's case. I came down hard on him for his poor grades, his lack of motivation to do anything but watch TV and play ball, his negative attitude around the house and his manners.

I pulled back on the criticism and looked for positive things. Thank goodness, during this time that we had emotionally shut each other out, he was still communicating with his mother! His birthday came, and I got a special card that helped this "macho" father express the fact that I loved him and was proud of him. In retrospect, I was lucky he didn't completely shut me out. I needed to make changes, and so did my son. It's amazing how my taking the lead resulted in progress for my son and for the growth of our relationship. I knew I didn't want to lose him, and I worked at it!

Seeking independence can result in communication problems. Patience is a key to resolving these differences. This is a time when you need to begin to talk to your preteen in a way you would talk to other adults and friends. Sit down face-to-face and give her your **full** attention. It's hard work! Listen to the meaning behind the words, hear the message and guide her toward appropriate behavior.

Making a significant effort now will pay off later as the teen years appear. You will have a sound foundation to build upon.

This newsletter is published for North Dakota families with sixth-graders by the NDSU Extension Service and distributed through your county extension office. See your extension agent for more parenting information and other nutrition, youth and family programs.