



youth service bureau

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## Why Does “You’re Grounded!” Never Seem to Work?

Exploring Discipline Techniques for your Tweens and Teens

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Picture this: your teenager comes home past curfew and finds himself grounded for two weeks. He isn’t allowed to leave the house or contact his friends outside of school. It seems like a good plan... until the two weeks are up and he decides to stay out even later than before. He may think, “I was only grounded for two weeks. What’s the big deal?”

Grounding is one of the many discipline strategies parents turn to when their teens make poor decisions. **So why does “You’re grounded!” never seem to work so well, and what can parents try instead?**

To better understand why certain discipline techniques may not work so well, we need to start at the beginning. The word “discipline” comes from the word “disciple,” which means, “to teach.” **Therefore, discipline should not be seen as “punishment,” but rather as a teachable moment.** Essentially, when you discipline your child you are *teaching* him or her; you are teaching right from wrong, what is acceptable behavior, and what is unacceptable behavior. Punishment treats the *person* as wrong and focuses on what has happened in the past, but discipline treats the *act* as wrong and focuses on the future and what can be done differently. The goal is for your child to eventually become **self-disciplined** (demonstrating acceptable behavior without needing your help and reminders).

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### Where Do I Start?

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First and foremost, **kids learn by observing adults**, especially their parents. Be a role model and *teach* them what appropriate behavior looks like by showing them, not telling them. The next step is to **explain to your children what you expect of them *first*, followed by the consequences for breaking the rules.** Teens still need and want structure and limits, even though they crave independence. You can find a balance between the two by offering your teens a choice: they can

choose to follow the rules or break the rules, and if they choose to break the rules, then they will experience certain consequences.

But what happens if your child knows the expectations and consequences, but still chooses to misbehave? **Consistently following through with the consequences is essential.** “Kids have to believe that you mean what you say,” according to KidsHealth.org.

I once heard a story about a dad who told his kids they would go out for ice cream after dinner, but only if they ate their vegetables (classic story, right?). The youngest son refused, so when they reached the ice cream shop, the dad wouldn't let him get any ice cream. The son was upset and crying, but the dad calmly explained the rule again: no vegetables, no dessert. The dad meant what he said, and although it was difficult seeing his son crying as the rest of the family enjoyed their ice cream, it taught his son a valuable lesson: there are rules, and if you don't follow them there will be consequences. Consequences don't need to be painful or harsh, but they ought to allow the young person to be uncomfortable.

**This is where disciplining your teen can easily fall apart!** It can be extremely difficult for some parents to follow through on consequences, for whatever reason. In some cases, parents ground their teen out of anger, come to see that grounding them for a month was an unreasonable or unrealistic amount of time, and then eventually back down and cut the time short. Or, you may take away your daughter's cell phone for a week, but by Wednesday she's begging to have it back and you give in. This too shows your teen that you don't mean what you say.

One important thing to note: **you and your partners in parenting (spouse, grandparents, guardians) must be on the same page when it comes to discipline.** If you say no and your husband says yes, your children will know exactly who to ask to get what they want. Be sure to communicate with your partner/other guardians and agree on what is appropriate discipline for your child. If it is difficult to work together on this issue, we encourage you to seek counseling or professional help, because being on the same page when it comes to discipline is essential for your child's well-being.

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## Deciding on Consequences

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So what are some appropriate consequences for misbehavior? The answer may actually depend on the child and the misbehavior. **Here are some things to think about when deciding on consequences:**

- 1) **Consequences need to be clear, specific, and have clear parameters.** This is why telling your teen “You’re grounded for a week” can be ineffective. Can they have friends over? Can they get time off for good behavior? If the consequences are unclear, your child may not have any motivation for behaving nicely while grounded.
- 2) **Think about a reasonable time limit for the punishment, or try shorter-term consequences.** Kids’ brains are still developing, so they only have the capacity to think ahead (and back) a short period of time. Grounding your teen for a month or taking away their cell phone for weeks at a time may not be effective because it is likely the teen will forget why they are being punished in the first place – and you might, too! After a few days or weeks, it may no longer feel like your child is grounded, and “normal” life resumes. Try sticking with more reasonable time limits, like a few days or a week at most. During that time, check-in with your child often and offer feedback on his or her behavior. At the end of the week, you can always re-evaluate your kid’s behavior at that point in time and decide if additional consequences are necessary.
- 3) **It’s important to “pick your battles.”** Not all misbehaviors require a stern punishment. If you punish your teen for every little mistake, they may start to resent you and view you only as the “punisher.”
- 4) **As the parent, it is also important to think about the root of the issue.** So your son comes home late from a party. Are you upset because he broke the rule, or are you upset because he worried you? Usually, the root of the issue comes down to broken trust. You trusted that your son would come home on time, and when he didn’t, it worried you and it broke your trust in him. The point of a consequence should be to teach your child an important lesson, to recreate structure, and to rebuild broken trust. Consequences are not just about punishing the bad behavior.
- 5) **The key is communication.** Whatever consequences you decide, be sure to ask for your child’s side of the story. Then, tell your child why you are upset about their misbehavior, why they are having a consequence, and what their specific consequence is for that

misbehavior. Many times the conversation ends with “You’re grounded!” Your child may know he did something wrong, but that’s not always enough. Ask your children how they could have acted differently and help them see that there are always alternative choices to misbehaviors. Consider asking your child for ideas on what an appropriate consequence could be. Involving them in the conversation moves the ‘internalization’ process along. Giving your teenager some control in the situation acknowledges that he is becoming an adult and that you respect him. He may be more willing to comply if he had some say in the consequence process.

- 6) Make sure the consequence fits the crime.** Consider consequences that are more closely related to the misbehavior as an alternative to grounding. If your daughter loses her cell phone, have her work/do chores to pay for a new one. If your son misses curfew, make his curfew earlier next weekend. Taking away your son’s cell phone for missing curfew may frustrate him, because it can be difficult for a teen (and his developing brain!) to understand how breaking curfew equals getting the cell phone taken away. If the consequence fits the crime (and if the consequence has reasonable limits), your teen may be more willing to comply, and more likely learn from the experience. Be creative – and ask for guidance too.
- 7) Stay calm.** Yelling at your child while you are angry may only cause them to yell back, and you may regret your decision to punish your child so harshly once you calm down. Give yourself some time to cool down before approaching your child. Set the tone for the conversation and show your teen that you can both handle the situation maturely.
- 8) Consequence the individual, not the group.** For example, if you tell your teen he cannot play in his baseball game this weekend as a consequence, you might be teaching him but you’re also may be punishing his team. Consider alternative consequences that still allow him to follow through on his commitment to the team. Similarly, if your teen is grounded the weekend you have a family trip planned, arrange for him to stay home with a family friend. Don’t punish the rest of the family by making everyone miss the entire trip.
- 9) Don’t employ consequences with guilt or shame.** Saying things like “Don’t act like that, everyone will think I am a bad mother!” shames the child and doesn’t help them learn from mistakes. Similarly, punishing your child by shaming can be very destructive for a child’s

self-esteem. You may have seen this “shaming” trend on the Internet and social media, but it should be avoided. It typically leads to humiliation and distrust.

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## Alternatives to Grounding

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Tired of always resorting to grounding and need some alternative ideas? Here are some suggestions:

- 1) In *some* situations, **having a discussion** with your child about their misbehavior and what you would like to see in the future can be as powerful as grounding or taking away privileges. Sometimes just seeing your disapproval can be enough!
  
- 2) Restitution, or compensation for what was lost, can be a good consequence for some teens. It’s a logical consequence that allows teens to see a direct connection between their actions and the consequence designed to better fix the situation. Restitution can take many forms, but may include having your child pay for various expenses, or at least a significant portion, such as replacing a device.
  
- 3) Have your teen **volunteer** (perhaps with you or another adult you trust) for a week instead of grounding or restricting privileges. It offers them a new opportunity, opens their eyes to the bigger world around them, and may teach them something new, including the opportunity to learn more about themselves.
  
- 4) **Get creative!** One mom created a chore list with points and only un-grounded her kids when they reached a certain number of points. You may also want to write a “behavior contract” with your child. There are many other ideas out there – ask your friends and other trusted adults for even more suggestions!

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One thing to remember about discipline is that while it is important to be clear about which behaviors will get consequences, **it is just as important to acknowledge and reward good behavior**. As KidsHealth.org puts it, “Discipline is not just about punishment but also about recognizing good behavior.” Sometimes acknowledging good behavior is more powerful than punishing the bad behavior. Telling your teen “I really appreciate that you made your bed this morning” may inspire her

to do it again tomorrow. After all, it's easy to mess up when the only things parents recognize or acknowledge are the mistakes. In this regard, consequences can include rewards.

Finally, **love your children**. Listen to them. Respect them as they grow from children into young adults. It's never too late to change your parenting ways or try some new discipline techniques. Next time you're thinking about yelling, "You're grounded!" try something new. You may be surprised with how your teenager responds.

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## Resources

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