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# **Shifting responsibility to your child: teenage years**

As they learn and develop, children want and need responsibility. It’s an important part of their growth and development. But it can be hard for you to let go – here are some ideas for finding a balance.

**Responsibility and teenagers: what you need to know**

During the teenage years, children’s need for responsibility and autonomy gets stronger – it’s an important part of their path to young adulthood. To become capable adults, teenagers need to learn to make good decisions on their own.

The process of helping children take responsibility and make decisions is a key task for parents. You have an important role in training and supporting your child to be ready for more responsibility. This means you need to plan when and in what areas to let your child start making decisions.

How quickly you hand over responsibility to your child is up to you. It depends on things like your own comfort level, your family and cultural traditions, and your child’s maturity.

Ideally, you and your child should both feel comfortable with the shift of responsibility and the pace of change. Too much or too soon might leave you both feeling overwhelmed. Too little or too slow might end up with your child feeling impatient or rebellious.

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### **How to start shifting responsibility: yes, no and maybe**

Shifting responsibility to your children is a gradual process. It starts with letting your children make their own choices in some areas, or asking them to take on responsibility for certain things. You might not like all your children’s choices, but learning to be responsible helps your children develop skills for life.

When you’re thinking about whether to give your children more responsibility or to ask them to take on more responsibility, you have three options – yes, no and maybe.

**The ‘yes’ option**

This is for issues or activities that you feel your children:

* are ready to take on – for example, walking or riding to school by themselves.
* should be expected to take on – for example, cooking a family meal once a week or paying for their own clothes from their pocket money
* should be up to your children – choosing their own hair cut or clothes.

When you put something in the ‘yes’ basket, you’re saying that you’ll accept your children’s decision, even if it’s not what you would prefer, or you’ll expect them to take on the task.

If your children handle the responsibility in a way you like, you can show your approval.

If you don’t like the decision, stand back and try not to step in, unless you think your children are in danger. These are opportunities for your children to learn from experience.

**The ‘no’ option**

You might say ‘no’ to decisions that relate to potentially dangerous activities.

For example, these might involve things teenagers aren’t yet legally allowed to decide for themselves, like drinking alcohol. Or there might be things that could have a negative impact on other members of the family – for example, if your children’s decision would cost a lot of money.

Making the ‘no’ option work is about good communication and setting clear limits on behaviour. For example, the way you say ‘no’ matters. Giving the impression you absolutely forbid something might not be as helpful as saying, ‘I am not going to agree to this at this stage because …’.

**The ‘maybe’ option**

This is the grey area. You and your children might be able to negotiate a way to turn a ‘no’ into a ‘yes,’ depending on the circumstances. This might involve letting your children try something new to see how it goes – for example, letting your children go to the skatepark with their friends one afternoon a week.

[Negotiating](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/negotiating_teenagers.html) is where the growth happens. When you turn a ‘no’ or ‘maybe’ into a ‘yes’, your children get the chance to show you that they are ready for more responsibility.

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### **Deciding when you and your children are ready to shift responsibility**

Everyone is different. You might need to experiment to work out when and in what areas your children are ready for more responsibility.

A good way to start is to use family meetings to give your children a real voice in important decisions. This helps your children feel valued. It’s also a good way for you to learn more about how they deal with choices.

Here are some other things to consider.

Level of maturity: some teenagers are more mature than others, and their ability to act responsibly varies from situation to situation. Think about your children’s skills when deciding whether they are ready for responsibility. For example, a teenager who asks to go to the city with friends might be allowed to go if the teenager has been responsible when going out with friends at other times.

Learning from experience: teenagers need the opportunity to work some things out for themselves. If there is no immediate danger, life can be an effective teacher too. This approach also has the benefit of giving you more time to manage and enjoy your own life. It gives your children the chance to show you how responsible they can be too.

Legality: with drinking, smoking and education or employment, for example, there are legal issues to think about, as well as your children’s health and wellbeing:

* The legal drinking age in Ecuador territories is 18 years.
* It’s illegal to buy cigarettes under the age of 18 years.

These things need to stay in the ‘no’ category, regardless of what other teenagers do and other parents allow. As adults we need to support the law talking about this matter.

Level of risk: teenagers don’t always think about long-term consequences, and they sometimes want to do things that put their safety and wellbeing at risk. You might decide that going to an all-night party involves more risk than benefit, but going to a late movie screening might be fine.

Impact on others: if your children’s choices are unfair or hurtful to others, you might choose to keep some control.

For example, if your children choose to play loud music late at night, you might not let them make that decision if it disturbs other members of the family. Ground rules like ‘Music gets turned down after 9 pm’ also help when your children want to make choices that affect others.

Your family values: are you willing to let your children make decisions or behave in ways that clash with your values? For example, parents who believe kindness and tolerance are important probably won’t let their children behave disrespectfully towards others.

Looking after yourself: parents also set boundaries to protect their own rights and needs. You might say ‘no’ if your children’s request is unreasonable or places an unfair burden on you – for example, driving children around all day, or paying for lots of expensive equipment.

Your ultimate aim is to give your children autonomy in more important areas, like going out unsupervised or making decisions about future study or employment.

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### **Potential problems with shifting responsibility**

Too little

If you don’t let your children have any responsibility, they have no chance to make decisions and learn through experience.

Too much

When responsibility comes too fast, teenagers might end up making bad decisions and undermining their confidence by doing things they’re not quite ready for. If you and your teenager aren’t sure about a new responsibility, you could use problem-solving to work out whether your child is ready for it.

When rules are broken

[Staying connected](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/staying_connected_teenagers.html) to your children is the best way to ensure that rules you’ve agreed on are respected. But most teenagers will challenge the rules at some point. It’s one of the things that teenagers do as part of testing boundaries. You might want to decide and agree on consequences for when rules are broken.

When decisions go bad

Decision-making is a learning experience for your children. Not all of their decisions will be good ones. Problem-solving can help you work with your children to make better decisions and learn from mistakes.

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