

## Parenting Rules and Expectations: "But Everyone Else Is Doing It!"

By Janet Lehman, MSW



Your child: "Everyone else is going to the party. Why can't I?"

You: "I don't care what 'everyone else' is doing. You can't go and that's final."

Your child: "Why are you so mean? You never let me do anything. I hate you!"

Do you ever wonder if your rules are too strict—or too lenient? When is it time to reel your child back in, and how will you know when it's safe to loosen the reins a bit? Most importantly, is your child ready for more independence, or showing clear signs that he's not?

*"It's okay to say 'no'—and in fact, sometimes that's exactly what your child needs."*

If your child is asking for more independence, it's important to realize that this is normal. Kids really *should* want more freedom. They should want to do more with peers as they get older rather than isolating themselves at home. On the other hand, don't let your child bully you into giving them more freedom. If your child is pushing and pushing in order to get you to agree to something, you don't have to respond right away. You can always say, "I need to think about it. I want to talk to your father and your friend's parents first." Take that time to figure out if you're comfortable with the request, if it's safe, if your child is ready for more freedom, and what the normal expectations are for kids in his age range. Remember, it's okay to say "no"—and in fact, sometimes that's exactly what your child needs.

Here are 5 things you can do as a parent to determine if your child is ready for more freedom (or not), and how to give it to him or set firmer limits.

**1: Develop reasonable expectations.** In order to strike the right balance as a parent, it's important to lay the groundwork first by doing your homework. That means finding out what normal expectations are for kids in your child's

age group. Norms differ for every age range: younger kids might want to stay up later, watch a special TV show, or play a new video game. Maybe they're starting to ask if they can stay overnight at a friend's house. Older kids, on the other hand, are looking do to things like borrow the car and attend concerts and parties.

Investigate. Talk to others. It's important not to stay isolated as a parent around these kinds of subjects because then you run the risk of having your child be the one to tell you what the norm is. They might try to push things on you by saying things like, "Tommy's mom lets *him* do it."

You don't necessarily have to abide by his friends' parents rules, but it's good to know what others out there are doing. Make your own judgment about what your child should be allowed to do based on your family's values and what you know of your child. How do you know when your child is ready for more independence? I always tell parents, "You're the best judge of what your child needs. Listen to your gut."

**2. Be clear and complete with your expectations.** Let your kids know what the rules are. If you have a rule that's really important to you, feel free to say it over and over, like a slogan: "No drinking, period." Or "Only one other child in the car when you drive," or "Follow the speed limit."

**3. Know the Facts.** If your child is asking if he can go to a party, you want to get the facts first and attend to safety concerns. Ask the following: "Who's going, how are you getting there, where are you going, and who's going to be home?" If he can't give you those details, then he may not be ready for that kind of activity. If he can and you decide it's okay, you can say, "Yes, you can go, but you can't drive anyone else. And you need to be back by your curfew." (Don't worry if your child grumbles. Believe it or not, kids actually feel safer when parents set some parameters around their behavior.) Let's say your child goes to the party, follows all the rules, and comes back in good shape. Chances are the next time it will be easier for you to give him that kind of freedom. Eventually, you might let him take another step toward independence by allowing other kids to go with him in the car.

**4. Make incremental steps.** When it comes to giving your child more independence, start with small steps. If she successfully meets the expectations of each step, then you can add more responsibility or more freedom. For example, if your child wants to have a curfew of 12 p.m. instead of 11 p.m., you might say, "Let's start at 11:30 p.m. If you can come in at that time for two weeks, we can talk about moving it to 12 p.m." This way, your

child is showing you that she can follow the rules. If you always say “no” out of fear that something bad might happen, the risk is that your child will never learn how to manage independence because she won't have had the opportunities to learn.

If your child is acting up and can't follow your incremental rules, this tells you that she's not ready for more independence. Generally kids want more freedom and can learn how to earn it.

Here are four questions you can ask your child before you give them some additional freedom:

- 1. How will we know it's working?**
- 2. How will we know it's not working?**
- 3. What will we do if it's working?**
- 4. What will we do if it's not working?**

Those are powerful questions, whether you ask them in regard to your child staying up later, using the car, or going to a dance. Here's how you can apply it. Imagine this scenario: Your teen wants to go to his first concert with some friends. Let's say as a parent, you're nervous, but open to the idea. The conversation might go like this:

“This is a pretty big step. How will we know it's working—that you're able to handle it—if we let you go?” Your child might say, “I'll go to the concert and come straight home afterward.” You might want to add the following: “That's right, you'll go straight to the concert and call or text me when you get there. Then you'll text me when it's over and let me know you're coming home.”

The next question is, “How will we know it's *not* working?” And the answer: “If I don't hear from you all night. If I find out you drove other kids in the car or were drinking. If you come home late.”

End the conversation with the last two “what” questions:

“What will we do if it works out? I'll be more likely to let you go next time.”

“What will we do if it doesn't work out? We'll take a break on concerts for awhile until you can show me that you can be more responsible.”

Those terms are the elements for any discussion around your child meeting responsibilities or doing new things. This is especially effective because it focuses your kids on the rules while giving *you* a structure to fall back on if your child can't meet the expectations.

It's also important to be aware of the fact that there are going to be missteps on your child's part along the way when they don't meet the expectations. Let's say your child drives to the party safely, doesn't drink, and doesn't have friends in the car, but he comes home 30 minutes late. Along with the conversation listed above, talk with him about what was going on at the time and the choices he made. Ask, "What can you do differently next time so you don't come home late again and get in trouble?" With kids of all ages, let them know that they're not going to be given more freedom until they can meet the next step.

Believe me, I'm a mom myself and I know that none of this is easy. We worry, we agonize and we spend many sleepless nights hoping we've made the right decisions as parents. Behind much of our reluctance to reel out more freedom is our fear that we won't be able to protect our kids—that they'll do something that's unsafe or scary. If you realize you're way out of sync with other parents in terms of your expectations, it's worth looking at what's behind it. Does it have to do with your child and the risks involved, or does it have more to do with you and your fears? Understand that as your child grows, you really do need to offer him the opportunity for age-appropriate independence. After all, how is your child going to learn to be independent on his own if he's never given the chance to try new things? It's difficult, but we need to make those leaps sometimes as parents so our kids can learn to fly.

## About Janet Lehman, MSW

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Janet Lehman, MSW has worked with troubled children and teens for over 30 years and is the co-creator of *The Total Transformation Program*. She is a social worker who has held a variety of positions during her career, including juvenile probation officer, case manager, therapist and program director for 22 years in traditional residential care and in group homes for difficult children.