



WHEN TO SAY YES  
HOW TO SAY NO

# BOUNDARIES WITH TEENS

**DR. JOHN TOWNSEND**  
Coauthor of the Bestselling *Boundaries*

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**DR. JOHN TOWNSEND**

(COAUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING *BOUNDARIES*)





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EPub Reader Format  
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*To all those who are engaged in helping teens  
navigate safely into adulthood.  
Your love and effort will not be in vain.  
God bless you.*

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**T**he mistake that Sharon and I both made, and we both agree on this, is we never set any boundaries.

Ozzy Osbourne

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## INTRODUCTION

### Who Threw the Switch?

I had known Trevor since he was six, because our families ran in the same circles. As a preteen, he was a normal kid, not perfect, but not out of control either. He was respectful of adults and fun to be around.

Then, when he was thirteen or fourteen, my wife, Barbi, our kids, and I ran into him and his mom Beth, at a movie theater one night, and we adults started talking. It wasn't long before all of the kids started getting restless, particularly Trevor. He and his mom had a conversation that went something like this:

“Mom, I wanna go.”

“Just a minute, honey.”

“I said I wanna go!”

Beth looked a little embarrassed and said, “Trevor, we're almost done talking, okay?”

“HEY! I — SAID — I — WANT — TO — GO!”

People standing around in the theater began looking over at our little group.

His mom looked mortified. His face was a little flushed, but he didn't look at all self-conscious. He had only one thing on his mind — getting his mom moving.

She quickly said her good-byes, and the two of them left.

This encounter sticks in my mind because of the huge contrast between the Trevor who used to be and the Trevor who now was. It was as if a switch had been thrown. Whatever respect he'd once had for his mom, and likely others, had been greatly diminished.

Perhaps you can relate to Beth's experience as a parent. You may have an adolescent who, as a preteen, was more compliant and easier to connect with. Or perhaps you saw seeds of trouble in your child's preteen years, only to watch those seeds sprout when adolescence hit. Or maybe your child doesn't seem that much different, just bigger and stronger. In any case, it all points to the reality that *parenting teens is not like parenting at any other age, because children change dramatically during their teenage years.*

## The Challenges Parents of Teens Face

Parents face many different issues and struggles in their efforts to parent their teens effectively, as demonstrated in this list of typical adolescent behaviors:

- has a disrespectful attitude toward parents, family, and others
- challenges requests or rules
- is self-absorbed and unable to see things from anyone else's perspective
- is lazy and careless about responsibilities
- has a negative attitude toward life, school, or people
- is emotionally withdrawn and distant from you
- has a tendency to pick friends of whom you disapprove
- erupts in anger that sometimes seems to come out of nowhere
- lacks motivation for school and fails to maintain grades
- neglects home chores and responsibilities
- has mood shifts that seem to have neither rhyme nor reason
- is mean to siblings or friends
- lacks interest in spiritual matters
- detaches from family events and wants to be with friends only
- lies and is deceptive about activities
- is physically aggressive and violent
- is truant from school or runs away
- abuses substances — alcohol, drugs, pornography, and so on
- engages in sexual activity

This list could go on, of course. It's no wonder that when faced with one or several of these problems, many parents become discouraged, overwhelmed, or confused about what to do. You don't have to be one of them. If you are reading this book because your teen exhibits any of the above behaviors, be encouraged. These problems have solutions. You don't have to resign yourself to simply coping and surviving for the next few years. Life with your teen can be much better than that. You can take some steps that can make major differences in the troublesome attitudes and behavior of your adolescent.

I have seen many teens become more responsible, happier, and better prepared for adult life after their parents began to apply the principles and techniques discussed in this book. Many of these teens

not only made positive changes in their lives, but they also reconnected with their parents at levels that the parents had thought they would never experience again. These principles work — if you work them.

## Teens Need Boundaries

The problems listed earlier all have a common foundation: *the battle between the teen's desire for total freedom and the parents' desire for total control*. All teens want the freedom to do what they want when they want. They need to learn that freedom is earned and that they can gain freedom by demonstrating responsibility. Adolescence is the time in life when kids are supposed to learn this lesson.

By the same token, parents need to be able to recognize when they are being overcontrolling and when they are being healthy and appropriate about saying “no.” They need to be able to make this distinction in order to do their job: helping teens learn responsibility and self-control so that they use freedom appropriately and live well in the real world. To do this, parents must help teens learn boundaries.

I cannot overstate the importance of your role here. In the midst of your teen's demands, tantrums, threats, and acting out, your task is to sift through the craziness and lovingly set firm, appropriate limits. When your teen behaves responsibly, you can loosen the reins a little and grant more freedom. You are the clear voice of sanity in your child's world. Your teen needs your voice and your help in learning how to set boundaries.

What are boundaries? Simply put, boundaries are one's personal property line. They are how you define yourself, say who you are and who you are not, set limits, and establish consequences if people are attempting to control you. When you say “no” to someone's bad behavior, you are setting a boundary. Boundaries are good for you and good for the other person, for boundaries help people clarify what they are and are not responsible for in life. (For a fuller treatment of boundaries, please refer to the book Dr. Henry Cloud and I wrote: *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No, to Take Control of Your Life*.)<sup>1</sup>

Because of all the developmental changes teens are going through, they often don't have good control over their behavior, a clear sense of responsibility for their actions, or much self-discipline and structure. Instead, they often show disrespect of authority (as in Trevor's case), impulsiveness, irresponsibility, misbehavior, and erratic behavior. They are, as the Bible describes it, “like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.”<sup>2</sup>

Teens need to develop good boundaries in order to make it successfully through this season of life. Healthy boundaries give them the structure, self-control, and sense of ownership they need to figure out all their “who am I?” questions and to deal with the physiological and developmental changes they are experiencing.

Boundaries function somewhat like the trunk of a tree. The trunk holds the leaves, fruit, and roots together. However, all trees with strong trunks started out as weak saplings. They needed to be tied to a stake because they couldn't yet handle their own weight. They needed to lean on and be supported by something outside themselves. Then, in time, the trees matured and took over that job for themselves.

The process of developing boundaries is similar. Teens can't create their own "trunks." They don't have the necessary tools to become responsible, thoughtful, and empathetic with others. Like a tree sapling, they need help from outside themselves. Parents are the stake for their teens. They are the temporary external structure teens need in their last launch into real life. When parents tell teens the truth, set limits, establish curfews, confront misbehavior, and do a host of other things, they are providing a structure and helping teens to develop a structure. If all goes well, teens will ultimately and safely discard their parents' structure and, using their own structure, be able to meet the demands of adult life and responsibility.

And that is the purpose of this book, to show you how to help your adolescent shoulder responsibility for her actions, attitudes, and speech so that she learns the gift of self-control and ownership over her life. The whole process starts with you, the parent. So in this book you will learn a deceptively simple skill that all parents of teens need: knowing *when to say Yes, and how to say No*. That is how to implement and enforce healthy, loving boundaries with your adolescent.

After reading this you may think, *I don't really have good boundaries either. How can I dispense what I don't possess?* That is a common and important concern. A teen without boundaries needs a parent with boundaries. You'll find help for how to do this in the first part of this book, which teaches and equips you to develop your own personal limits so that you can transmit what you know and what you are to your teen.

## Get the Big Picture

What are your goals and desires for your teen? Do you want some peace and quiet around the house? Less disrespect? No involvement with alcohol or drugs? Better school performance? More consideration for the needs and feelings of others?

It is easy for parents of teens to lose perspective and a sense of what is really important. They get no help from teens, who live in the present; it's all about what they are doing this second. Teenagers have little interest in, awareness of, or concern about the future. They live their lives pushing the *Urgent* button. That's why parents need to create an *Important* button for themselves and their teens. They need to guide their children in the right direction.

You will probably have to work a bit on this double perspective, because it doesn't come naturally. I can remember when one of my kids and I were discussing how late he should be able to go out with his friends one night. My son said, "You don't see it the right way."

I had no problem with his words, but I found his tone disrespectful and sarcastic. So I said, "That sounds disrespectful."

"I don't think I was disrespectful," he responded.

We went round and round about that, and I found myself getting focused on winning this battle. It became for me less about whether he had been disrespectful and more about winning the argument (not a helpful goal with teens, by the way). But at some point, I noticed both of us getting angrier and more entrenched in our positions. I thought to myself, *You're forgetting the big picture — the "future" orientation. How is this interaction with my son helping to prepare him for adulthood?* So I said, "Okay. We see your attitude differently. I'd like your tone to be warmer and less sarcastic and t



sound more like this,” at which point I used the tone I thought was respectful. Then I said, “What I heard was this,” and I used the tone I had heard from him. “So from now on, that’s how I’d like to be talked to when we disagree.” My son agreed to that. And to this point, he has tried to keep a civil tone with me and other adults.

I wanted my son to see that in the adult world, it is important to clarify matters before you make a decision, just to make sure that everyone involved is aware of what is expected. This is a skill needed in board meetings, in marriages, and in financial dealings. So keep in mind that the future preparation is, in the final analysis, ultimately more important than the present difficulty.

Armed with this double perspective on both today and tomorrow, you can establish appropriate, consistent, and lovingly established boundaries that can make a great difference in your adolescent’s present and future life.

## Is It Too Late?

Many parents of teens, aware that they are in the last stage of parenting, wonder if there is still time to help their kid learn responsibility and self-control. “Maybe I should just hang on and try to get through it,” they say. That is often a sign of weariness and giving up prematurely. In most cases, however, I would say that *healthy boundaries can make a significant difference*.

Remember the story of Beth and Trevor? Beth refused to give up, and because of this the story had a good ending. Beth called me a few days later, saying, “I’m sure you hate to have people ask you for advice about this sort of thing, but I would like some about Trevor.”

“Well,” I said, “I would probably begin by realizing that whatever you’re doing now to deal with Trevor’s attitude isn’t working.”

“That’s no problem for me,” said Beth. “I’ve tried everything anyway.”

“Are you sure?” I queried. “My hunch is that the ‘everything’ you have tried either isn’t everything, or it hasn’t been done the right way, or you haven’t tried long enough. Trevor doesn’t seem to experience any concern about taking responsibility for his actions. In fact, you are the one talking to me about Trevor, not Trevor. So you are more concerned than he is.”

Beth replied, “I don’t think Trevor even remembers what he did.”

“In that case,” I said, “I recommend that you start doing some things that will help Trevor be more concerned about his attitudes and actions.” Then I explained to her the key principles that are in the book. And over time, as Beth began to apply them, Trevor’s behaviors and speech began to change for the better. He still isn’t a perfect teen — whatever that is! — but his manner and actions are much healthier and more responsible.

So don’t give up. At this stage in life, your teen needs an involved parent who has good boundaries.

I say this for several reasons. First, even though teens are systematically detaching from their parents and moving into the world, at some level, *they are still dependent on their parents*. The

cannot function in the world on their own. Whether they recognize it, teens still need some important things from parents, such as:

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- grace, unconditional love, and compassion when the teen is hurt, failing, or bewildered
- guidance concerning school, college, and career
- wisdom for how to navigate relationship problems
- help in romantic entanglements

Teens also need the safety, structure, and warmth of a loving home that offers them protection when needed.

I have talked to many young adults who have told me, “When I was a teenager, I acted like my parents had nothing to say to me. I couldn’t afford to act differently. But inside, it mattered a lot what they said.”

Second, *teens do not have total freedom and permission*. Part of that freedom belongs to the parents. Teens are certainly in the last stage of childhood and should be becoming more and more autonomous. But they don’t yet have the rights and privileges of an adult. For example, they still need parental permission to go to certain movies and to sign off on school outings. This is good news because *a teen’s need for parental permission can be leveraged to motivate her to learn responsibility*. That is why withholding privileges can be very effective. Some parents need to take back some privileges. We will discuss this important aspect later.

Third, *the time it takes to fix matters isn’t necessarily the same amount of time it took for things to go wrong*. Some parents think, *I had no boundaries for fifteen years, and now I have three years left. I don’t have another fifteen to do it right, so why try?* This assumes a one-to-one correspondence between ineffective-to-effective parenting.

Actually, it’s not like that at all, because it’s not that simple. People can take less time to change than you might think. There are other factors involved, such as the appropriateness, consistency, and intensity of your actions; the involvement of others; and the readiness of the child’s internal world.

People in their seventies and eighties sometimes wake up to how they are being selfish and irresponsible. You can’t predict how telling the truth and establishing healthy boundaries will affect a teen, nor can you predict when the change will occur. I have seen parents with a seventeen-year-old who would be moving out in a few weeks still make significant inroads with a rebellious and destructive attitude. Don’t let your fears and discouragement limit a process of growth that God designed for your child. Sometimes the right intervention, given at the right time, with the right people, can make all the difference in the world.

### **But What If My Teen Doesn’t Change?**

Even so, let’s suppose you do have a teen who is not doing well and is almost out of the house. Consider the alternative. If you give up and go into survival mode, your teen has not experienced the benefit of being around loving, truthful, and strict parents and will be that much less ready for

successful adulthood. Even if your teen resisted every effort you attempted and you saw no change at all, ~~something good has still happened. In those last months and weeks, she has experienced an~~ internalized some events that cannot be easily shaken loose. For that brief time, love, responsibility, freedom, and consequences were applied to your teen's life in a way that was healthy and good.

As a psychologist, I have met many adults who blew off their parents' help when they were teenagers, only to remember years later what had been done. And they know at some level that this was a good way for them to live. So even if you don't see the fruit today or tomorrow, your teen will still have some memories of the way life should be lived. Take encouragement from the words of the prodigal son who finally "got it":

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

Don't count on getting an apology like that. Instead, *fight the good fight of setting boundaries all the way to the last minute that your teen is in your charge*. Your investment of time and energy will not be in vain.

## How to Use This Book

This book is structured in a meaningful order for parents of teens to be able to use it in the best way possible. As stated earlier, [part 1](#) will help you to develop your own personal boundaries, so that you can create the best boundaries for your teen. [Part 2](#) is a window into the mind and world of the adolescent, so that you can understand what your teen is thinking and feeling. [Part 3](#) shows you how to set healthy boundaries with your teen. And [part 4](#) explores specific problems that adolescents struggle with and offers tips on what you, the parent, can do about them.

If you have a specific area you are concerned about, such as alcohol, disrespect, or sex, turn to the relevant chapter in [part 4](#). Then, when you feel you have a grasp of what to do, start reading the book from the beginning, in order to learn how to use boundaries in the most helpful way possible. In the short term, this book will help you address problems of irresponsibility. Long term, it will help you think for yourself in ways that can mature your teen.

Sometimes the issue you are dealing with will not have boundaries at the center of its solution. For example, a depressed teen who is responsible but disconnected from others may need relationships and warmth instead of boundaries. And we will present these differences here. Boundaries are a large part of just about every problem's resolution. But bear in mind that setting boundaries alone isn't enough to make you a good parent: you also need love, reality, support, wisdom, patience, and your own growth as well. If you don't have these things in your life, this book can help you find people and ways to get them. You need them for your teen, and for you.

## A Confession

Before we go too much further, however, I need to inform you that, while I believe this book can help you parent your teen, Barbi and I are still living those years as this book is being written. Our son

Ricky and Benny, are now teens. So we are still definitely in the learning curve with you. The concepts and ideas in this book are based on my own clinical and counseling experience, my study of adolescent development, my understanding of the biblical principles of growth, and my personal experience. Still, only God knows what the future will be for our sons. We hope that the end of their teen story will turn out well for them. Until then, we are trying to live out the principles you will read about. I hope and pray for our own adolescents the same thing I hope for yours: that they will be fully prepared to take on the task of functioning as adults in the adult world.

So sit down, learn these principles and tips, and start being an active force in your adolescent's world. Be active, be loving, be present, be truthful, and be consistent; in other words, *be the parent*. If you need permission to be the parent, you have it. Reality, life, and God are all on your side. Go on, going, and become a parent who knows, in most every difficult situation, *when to say Yes and how to say No*.

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## PART ONE

### BE A PARENT WITH BOUNDARIES

Time is never time at all  
You can never ever leave without leaving a piece of youth  
And our lives are forever changed  
We will never be the same.

— Smashing Pumpkins, “Tonight, Tonight”

**A**sk any youth worker, youth pastor, or therapist of adolescents what most influences a teen’s ability to learn responsibility and self-control, and you will get the same answer: *a parent who models those qualities*. You must live what you are teaching your teen. So this part of the book will help you to develop and grow your own boundaries. It’s work. But really, how can you lose by becoming free, self-controlled, and honest yourself?

## Revisit Your Own Adolescence

One night when I was seventeen, I ran my parents' Ford Fairlane station wagon as fast as it would go. It gave out on me after about two miles. It just stopped, and that was it. The engine had to be rebuilt. What was I thinking? It was a station wagon! I had to call my dad at 1:00 a.m. so he could take me home. We had the car towed the next day.

While the Fairlane tragedy isn't a good memory, I benefited from that experience. When one of my sons told me that he had lost a watch I had given him, I remembered how crummy I had felt when I had to call my own father and tell him what had happened to the Fairlane. That memory helped me understand how bad my son was feeling about losing his watch, so I just told him, "Oh, well, we'll get another and try again."

If you have a pulse, you have similar stories from your adolescence. Teens do things that are irresponsible. That is the nature of adolescence. For some of us, the teen years had some minor blips and for others of us, they were miserable.

For the sake of your teen, remember your own adolescence. The more you can recollect how you felt and what you did then, the better a parent you will be.

### Your Teen Needs You to Have a Past

Why should you unearth those days? What benefit will it bring to your adolescent? Significant ones, as we will see. Remembering can help you show your teen:

**Empathy and identification.** It is easy to forget how difficult the teen years can be, and parents sometimes judge teens too harshly for behaving like a teenager.

But your teen needs a parent who will connect with him and show him empathy, who can identify with what he is going through and who understands the struggle of adolescence. He needs to know that he is not alone in the fight.

Think about how much you need someone to hear you and be there for you in your everyday struggles as an adult. What if every time you screwed up, all you heard was, “What in the world are you doing? Are you trying to ruin your life?” Wouldn’t it be easy to feel disheartened and give up? Your teen, whose brain is less developed than yours, is even less resilient in the face of criticism. Your support can soften the blows that will inevitably come your teen’s way.

This doesn’t mean that you should tell your teen lots of stories about your own adolescence. Parents often do that, thinking it’s helping, when it really ends up being more for the parent than for the teen. Instead, remember those days, give them a few stories now and then, but keep most of your memories to yourself and allow them to help you identify with your teen. I have had so many teens tell me how disconnected they feel when dad tells them all the stories of his adolescence. It’s much better for you to enter their world.

Nor does identifying with your teen mean you will approve of all his choices; rather, you are able to put yourself in your teen’s place — even when he is being rude, self-centered, and unreasonable. When you see a little part of yourself in your adolescent, you can give him the connection he needs to mature.

**Insight and wisdom.** Because you have survived your own adolescence, you have access to what helped you during those turbulent years, and why. When you remember what made a difference in your life, those memories can give you insight and wisdom so that you, in turn, can provide what your teen needs.

So ask yourself these three questions:

1. Who stuck with me without giving up on me?
2. What truths helped me make sense of the world?
3. What did I learn from the consequences of my actions?

My Boy Scout troop leader, A. J. “DK” DeKeyser, spent time with me during countless meetings and trips. He encouraged me to stay in Boy Scouts when I was ready to bail. And he didn’t tell my parents every bad thing I did; instead, he handled each one himself. DK is one of those people whose wisdom helped me learn persistence, and my memories of him have reminded me of the kind of parent I want to be.

**Hope.** All parents wonder if their teen will ever change, become responsible, or care about his or her life. Parents don’t know their children’s future. Yet, *because you can remember your own adolescence, you now can understand your own life and decisions.* You know that you went through tough times and made many bad decisions, but that you gradually became more connected, self-controlled, focused, and responsible. Your own years should offer you hope for your teen; you can convey that hope even when your teen is floundering.

My mother raised four kids. After I had grown up, I asked her how she made it. She told me that when she was overwhelmed with us, she would go to her own mom, who had raised six kids. Her mother would always tell her the same thing: “It’s just a stage; they’ll grow out of it.” This helped my mother

put up with us and help us get to the next stage, whatever it was.

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## Try to Remember . . .

Even though it's not uncommon for parents to talk about how much more challenging the world today for teens, research statistics say otherwise. For example, between 1978 and 2002, the average age for drinking alcohol for the first time went from 16.3 years to 16.2.<sup>4</sup> The age for smoking the first cigarette went up from 15.2 years of age to 16.1,<sup>5</sup> and the age for smoking marijuana for the first time went from 18.4 years of age to 17.2.<sup>6</sup> In 1991, 54 percent of students had had sexual intercourse. In 2003, the percentage was 46 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Today's parents can rest assured that many of the challenges they faced in adolescence are similar to the challenges their teens face. So, reflect back on how, as a teen, you may have struggled in the following areas, and allow those experiences to help you offer your teen compassion and help.

**Conflict with and distance from your parents.** Most likely, you went through a rough patch in which you thought your parents were controlling and didn't understand you. You may have been overtly defiant and had long and loud arguments with them. Or perhaps you were sneaky and did what you wanted behind their backs. Then again, you may have never disagreed with your parents and weren't able to individuate from them. If so, you likely entered into adolescence later in life, when you had already left home.

No matter when you experienced this conflict with your parents, you probably didn't enjoy the fighting or the duplicity with them. Parents are the center of a child's life, so it's always difficult for children to disconnect from them. So when you look at your teen's surly, angry face, understand that she does not enjoy the alienation any more than you do.

**Relational problems.** Who were your friends? Were you into sports, studies, art, music, church, or some combination of them? Remember how central your friendships were to you. They were the only world that mattered to you.

That sort of prominence probably had its downside too: cliques, arguments, broken romances, and fights. Think of how vigilant you had to be, sometimes to the point of being more concerned with who liked you than with who you liked. Think of how devastating it was when someone you trusted turned against you, and you had no way to deal with it. That is how your teen feels.

**Emotional and behavioral issues.** Did you ever feel depressed and very down? Lost and confused? Did you ever get high or drunk? Go further than you wanted to sexually? Experience angry outbursts that you couldn't control?

Sometimes when we think about the good old days of our teens, we whitewash the angst, negative feelings, and out-of-control behaviors that we struggled with. It's scary to do and feel things you can't manage.

Candace told me that as a teen she felt tremendous pressure to keep everyone cheered up and was unable to experience or talk about negative emotions. As a result of this, she developed a habit of sticking pins into her fingers until she bled, and says that at some level this calmed her down. No one ever found out about what she was doing. Years later she realized that sticking herself with pins was



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