A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

# Teen Privacy

axis

*“There should be a direct link between the amount of responsibility, consistency and honesty that kids show and the amount of privacy they’re allowed to have.*

—Kelly Wallace,
“How to cut your kids’ cell phone addiction”

# Privacy: The Age-Old Battle between Parents and Teens

*"It's none of your business!" "Stay out of my room!" "Stop snooping!"*

Sound familiar?

If you're dealing with this and are at your wits end, don't worry. You're not alone! Parents everywhere for generations have faced the same frustration. They, like you, have asked questions like: How should I respond when my teenagers start asserting their independence by drawing lines in the sand? Are they right to do so? Is their understanding of privacy, trust, and responsibility misguided? Is it ever ok to invade my teens' privacy? How do I know if I'm breaching their trust or taking legitimate steps to protect them? What does God say about privacy? And how do I have constructive conversations about it all, rather than battles of will? Answering these questions requires discernment and wisdom.

But don't despair! As frustrated as you might be from dealing with your secretive or stubborn teens ("Why me, God?!"), it's actually a beautiful opportunity to disciple them into a better understanding of privacy, trust, freedom, and accountability. The process is not easy, nor are the answers black and white. But it's worth your time and effort because you get to teach them how to become responsible, wise, God-fearing adults who make a positive difference in the world.

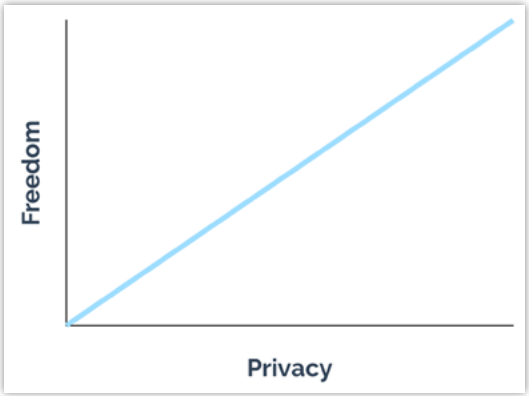
## What exactly is privacy?

Merriam-Webster defines privacy as "freedom from unauthorized intrusion." Dictionary.com defines it as "the state of being apart from other people or concealed from their view; solitude; seclusion." Both of these definitions get at some key qualities of privacy, but they fail to fully communicate what it is because they don't include an understanding of how our Almighty God designed us or how privacy fits into that picture. More on that in a bit.

## Why do teens want it so badly?

You may have wondered why teenagers—who are so quick to post their thoughts, feelings, outfits, bodies, activities, everything online—cling so desperately to their "right to privacy." Seems highly paradoxical, right? Understanding why they're often so quick to reveal themselves to the Internet or to their friends yet so reluctant to share anything with us requires stepping into their shoes and thinking like them.

Typically, teenagers yearn for privacy because of their understanding of it. In their minds, more privacy equals more freedom. If we were to graph it, it would look like this (right):



In essence, if they can get more privacy, it means they have more freedom to do whatever they want. They're no longer subject to prying eyes telling them what they can and can't do or to someone making them feel bad about what they look at, who they talk to, or what they spend their time doing.

So really, they don't necessarily want privacy in general; they just want privacy from the people who might not understand them or who might tell them that what they're doing is wrong or unhealthy. We can all relate to that in one way or another, even if we have to remember our own teenage years to do so.

Unfortunately, as much as they (and we) might want the above understanding of privacy and freedom to be true, it's just not. God didn't set up our world that way, and pretending that He did only hurts ourselves in the long run.

## So how did God set up privacy to work?

We googled "theology of privacy" and came up empty, save for a few seminaries' privacy policies. That's because, as Chris Ridgeway of *Christianity Today* also discovered, very few Christians are writing about it (despite digital privacy being a pressing concern for most people today). And in fact, God's Word itself seems to be more descriptive than prescriptive about privacy (c.f. Gal. 2:2, Mark 4:34, 1 Sam. 24:3). So we must take an overarching look at Scripture and how our world works to better understand it.

Jer. 23:24 says, "'Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the Lord. 'Do I not fill heaven and earth?'" Ps. 90:8 says, "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence." Ps. 44:21 says God "knows the secrets of the heart." Still other passages (Dan. 2:22 and Rom. 2:16) remind us that there is no privacy from an all-knowing God. He knows and sees all and will one day reveal all (Luke 8:17, Luke 12:2-3, Rom. 14:12). So if privacy from God is impossible, why do we have privacy from each other? To understand that, we need to go back to the beginning.

Genesis 3 tells us of Adam and Eve's desire to hide and clothe themselves after sinning, which is a stark contrast from before when they were naked and felt no shame. In contemplating this, Ridgeway (whose article we highly recommend reading) rightfully asks, "Is it possible that what we call 'privacy' is part of the curse?" He continues:

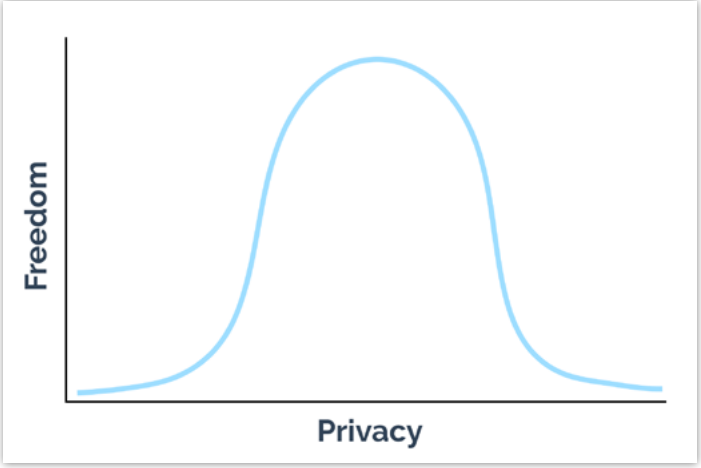
> *Maybe our fear or defense against the knowledge of others is rooted in a deeply broken part of our sinful nature. There's a certain uneasy truth to this. Carved into our souls, we both long for—and fear—intimacy. Our desire to be known and loved is outdone only by our fear of being known and loved.*

We *all* feel the tension between the longing to be known and the fear of being known. We were made to be in relationship and to be deeply known by God and others, but our sin now means that we have something to hide, to be ashamed of, that shows our unworthiness. Adam and Eve tried to hide their sin from God, and had they been successful, they would've become slaves to their shame, always doing more and more to keep the lie going, afraid that God would find out. The same thing happens to us: We're tempted to hide things because we know they're not good for us or because we're afraid of the consequences or condemnation we'll face. But healing and freedom only

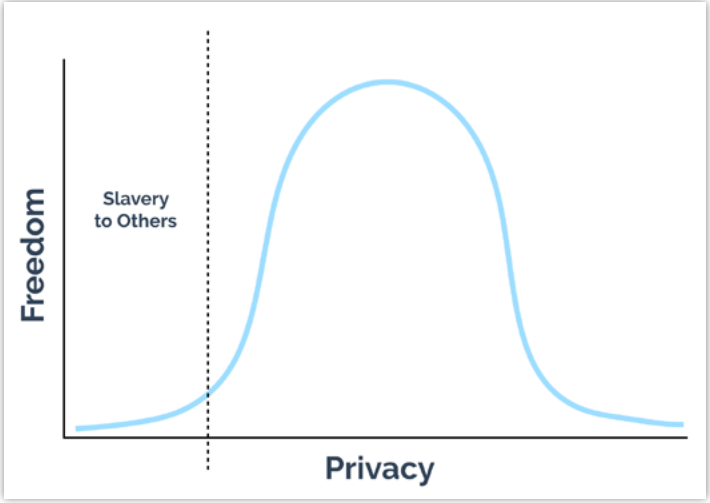
happen when we stop hiding and face what we've done. Someday God will reveal all our actions not because He wants to smite us, but because He loves us and wants true freedom for us.

As adults who love Christ, we (hopefully) resist the temptation to conceal our sin and ourselves, knowing that we only flourish when we live as God designed us to live—known by and accountable to a loving God and community—*not* when we give into the dysfunction—isolation and enslavement to our sin—brought about by the Fall.

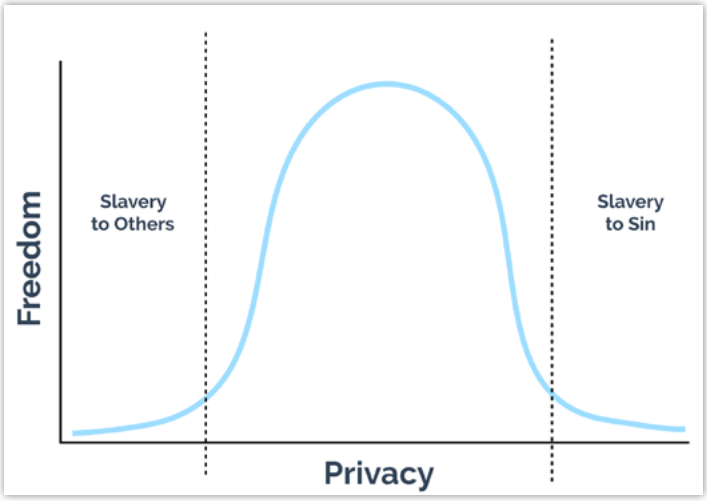
Looking at privacy as part of the curse and not as part of God's original design explains why our teenagers both long for and fear intimacy. They want to be known and accepted, yet they fear that being known will mean being held accountable for their sinful desires and temptations. So they isolate themselves from those who might hold them accountable ("Don't judge me, Mom!") while simultaneously laying themselves bare for the rest of the world. This perspective on privacy also reveals that more privacy *doesn't* actually lead to more freedom; instead, it leads to enslavement to our sin. Here's better way to graph it:



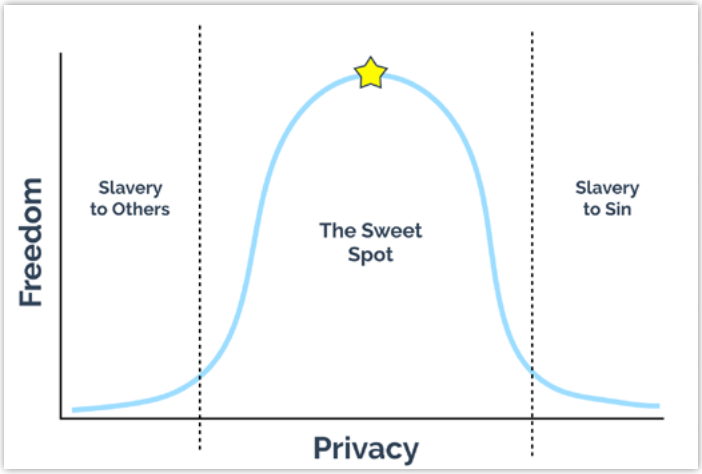

The reality is that we do live in a fallen world, so we need some level of privacy in order to protect our modesty and dignity, as well as others' (e.g. when we relieve ourselves, when we get dressed, or even when we discuss sensitive topics). Too little privacy means that we are enslaved to the control of others in one way or another.



Conversely, too much privacy is actually a bad thing. Rather than leading to more and more and more freedom, it eventually leads to less freedom because we become enslaved to our desires and to sin (a great example is pornography addiction).




Thus, as we grow up and become adults, our goal should be to live in the sweet spot (or better yet, at the apex with the perfect balance of privacy and freedom, but that's easier said than done, amiright?). And as parents, our goal should be to help our teens reach the sweet spot by the time they head out on their own.

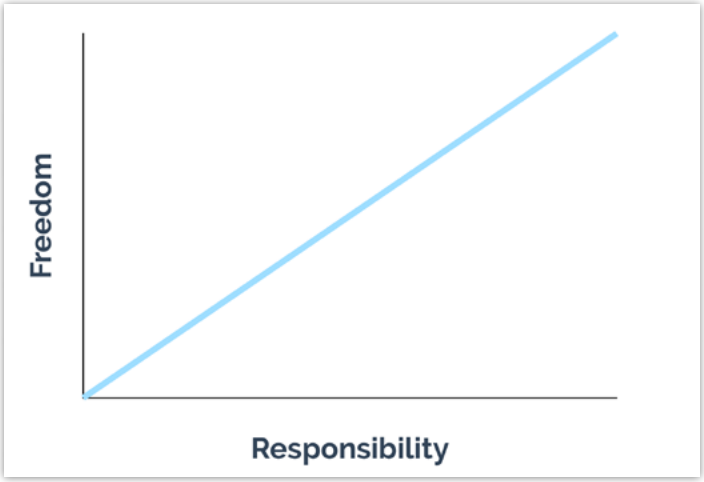



## How do I help them live in the sweet spot?

Obviously, we start life with no privacy—our parents know everything about us. That's for a good reason: We need them to take care of us! But as we slowly grow up and gain more autonomy, we also gain more privacy by default. Eventually our parents don't need to go to the bathroom with us or change our clothes or know every thought we have. But other types of privacy, like what we do on our phones or how spend our free time, don't (or at least shouldn't) come because we've reached a certain age; instead, they need to be earned through being responsible and trustworthy.

Why must they be earned? (A good question, and one that many teenagers have frustratedly asked.)

The answer goes back to freedom. If we don't get more freedom through more privacy, how do we get it? Despite what our culture constantly says, true freedom is not the ability to do whatever we want whenever we want to because, as we've seen, that leads only to enslavement to sin. Rather, true freedom is the ability to live as God designed us to: immune to the enslavement of sin and in harmonious relationship with Him, ourselves, others, and all of creation. What Adam and Eve's sin did was make us think that freedom could be found outside of God, so we search for it everywhere and anywhere. But God—our infinitely loving God—knows that He Himself is freedom. As contradictory as it sounds, we must give up our freedom (i.e. autonomy) in order to gain it (i.e. power over the curse).




So that's why responsibility (rather than privacy) leads to more freedom (right) and why privacy is instead a consequence of responsibility.

When we come to understand that following God is our freedom, we then choose to live as God prescribes regardless of whether anyone is watching, thus proving we can be trusted to continue following Him in private. And when we act irresponsibly in private (e.g. look at porn), we show that we can't be trusted and need more accountability in order to stay free from sin's hold over us.

So as parents, one of the best things we can do is impart a biblical view of privacy to our kids, then set up our homes in such a way that they mimic the relationship between responsibility and privacy that our kids will encounter in the real world. By doing so, we prepare them for the realities they'll face while giving them a safe place to ask questions, make mistakes, test the waters, and, yes, even fail.

## Anything else about privacy I should know?

**Privacy reveals who we really are.**
Archbishop William Temple said, "Religion is what you do with your solitude." We can learn a lot about what we truly love by evaluating what we do when we're alone. While God always knows what we're thinking, our thoughts are private unless we decide to share them with others (although someone who knows us extremely well might make a good guess at times). What do we think about the most? What are we constantly focused on gaining or afraid of losing? Answering these questions shows where our hearts are really aimed.

Besides our thought lives, we can evaluate other areas of our lives where we have solitude and privacy. How do we spend our alone time? Do we see an overall pattern of selfishness in our decisions? What about if we keep a journal? The whole idea of a journal is that because it's private, we'll be totally honest and truly reveal who we are.

**Yep—privacy is all about protection.**
We see God's word supporting the principle that privacy is about protection. We protect

ourselves and others by covering our nakedness and by controlling our sexual behavior. We guard trust in our relationships by not breaking other people's confidence. We humble ourselves and guard against pride by not flaunting our service to God. **Biblical privacy is always about being responsible for what God has given us—*not* about doing whatever we want.**

## How can I set up a system that helps my kids earn privacy through mature decisions and behavior?

We actually don't think it's best to focus on finding a particular "system" for setting boundaries. Rather, there are principles that parents should learn and wisely implement within their own families. Dr. Townsend , author of *Boundaries with Teens*, says, "[T]he best consequences matter the most, but preserve good things the teen needs." Here are a few principles and suggestions from Boundaries with Teens for how to choose good consequences for teenage boundary infractions:

- Remove something your teens want or implement something they don't. Taking away something they want is usually more effective and requires less work on your part.
- Allow them to face the natural consequences of a poor decision—don't rescue them. Try to make the consequence relevant to the infraction.
- Make the consequence one your teens care about—so you need to get to know your kids!
- Have more than one kind of consequence.
- Your consequences do need to match the offense, but choose the least severe one that will still be effective.
- Don't reward them for what they should already be doing.
- Learn when saying "no" is necessary versus when you're being controlling.
- When your teens behave responsibly, give them more freedom.

Here are some suggestions from *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life* by Drs. Cloud and Townsend:

- Don't impose boundaries that increase your teens' sense of helplessness—focus on rewards and consequences.
- Make the discipline age-appropriate.
- Aim to create internal (versus external) motivation with self-induced consequences.

While your boundary consequences should be clear, give your kids the freedom to make their own choices. If your teens are having behavioral problems, dig and find out what's really going on. These issues don't happen in a void; there's a reason for them. Dr. Townsend emphasizes that because boundaries separate people, it's crucial that you "always begin with love." There is a lot more we could say here about how to deal with the various struggles parents face regarding setting and keeping boundaries. But we recommend that you read the books listed below as resources to learn more!

One young woman we know really appreciates how her mom went about setting boundaries for her when she was teen. When the daughter went out, her mom's main

boundary was she wanted to know where her daughter was. She understood that the reason was her mother wanted to know she was safe. Rather than giving her a curfew, the mom allowed her to face the consequences to her education or work if she chose to stay out late. The result was that our friend understood she had this freedom because her mother trusted her and that the freedom would go away if she did something stupid. She says that her mother consistently treated her with grace and that it was always clear that her mother made her decisions out of love.

## What are appropriate levels of responsibility at different ages?

In *Boundaries* in a chapter called "Boundaries and Your Children," Drs. Cloud and Townsend give general guidelines on what healthy limits look like at different age levels. Here's a brief summary of what they say. We've included the guidelines for childhood in order to provide a contrast for adolescence.

- **0-5 months—**The focus is not on setting limits, but on providing security, the only boundary being the importance of the mother's presence.
- **5-10 months—**Parents should encourage their kids' attempts at separation while still being as available as possible.
- **10-18 months—**Children are exploring; parents should encourage their kids' "no" (this is how children start practicing boundary setting) while still keeping them in check and providing good discipline.
- **18-36 months—**Parents should allow their children to say "no" whenever possible, but preserve their own "no"; parents train their children to be able to say and hear "no" without fearing loss of love.
- **3-5 years—**This is a phase for sex role development when children identify with the parent of the same sex and compete with the parent of the opposite sex; parents need to encourage this process while maintaining the boundaries of the parent-child relationship.
- **6-11 years—**Children learn how to complete tasks, be disciplined when doing a job, delay gratification, set goals, and manage their time.
- **11-18 years—**This is when the de-parenting process happens; parents move toward influencing children instead of controlling them; teens get increased freedom and responsibility; limits and consequences have greater flexibility; the key question is not how to make them behave but how to help them survive (or better yet, thrive) on their own.

## What can I do in my own life to help my teens?

In *Boundaries with Teens*, Dr. Townsend recommends, *before* you start creating and implementing boundaries, to pause, take some time, and **recall what it was like to be a teenager**. The more you can empathize with your teens, the better you will be at parenting them. Keep in mind that the main way your kids will learn from you is by picking up **your** habits. You need good boundaries and accountability in your life. If you don't have them, your teens won't learn good boundary habits from you—and they *will*

call out your hypocrisy when you try to make them have them.

Teens need your grace, your unconditional love, and your compassion. You need community with other parents, a strong relationship with God, and to be unified with your spouse in your parenting approach. Single parents will need to depend on their communities for support and to guard against emotionally relying on their kids in inappropriate ways. Stepparents will have to navigate initially deferring discipline to the biological parent while patiently loving and pursuing their stepchildren.

## Ok, ok, but here's the most important question: Where do smartphones fit into the whole privacy talk?

Ah, yes. The smartphone. The main argument between parents and teens these days. You can really lean on the responsibility and freedom principle when it comes to smartphones. Having a smartphone is a *privilege* and *responsibility* that your teens need to protect.

One family with a younger teenage son had a policy that they could randomly check his phone to see what he was up to on it. On one of these occasions, they discovered he'd been hiding a relationship with a girl from them. So they sat down with him and read all of the texts between him and this girl aloud—**however**, they did so out of a posture of love and not out of condemnation and shame. Through reading the texts aloud, he was able to see that the girl was treating him disrespectfully (which she was) and that he should not have to put up with that behavior. This invasion of his privacy might have been painful or embarrassing at first, but in the end it helped him gain better perspective and choose what would help flourish.

As your teens get older, if they have demonstrated that they are responsible and trustworthy, you will want to loosen up on your oversight. Still, safety is preeminent:

> *If a teenager shows a pattern of decision-making that places them at risk, it is a parent's job to intervene and protect by limiting the child's access to dangers. For example, if a teen is found to be vulnerable to online predators, internet activity may need to be more heavily monitored.*

Earlier we mentioned the principle of relating boundaries to consequences. One mom, frustrated that her daughter couldn't put down her phone, initially threatened to take the phone away. Then the mom realized a more effective solution would be to allow the daughter the freedom to choose whether or not to use her maximum amount of data. If she did, the mother wouldn't keep paying for more data, so the phone provider would cut off her access to the internet until the next billing cycle. This strategy allowed the daughter the freedom to make her own decision and face a relevant, real-world consequence.

This article from TeenSafe has some tips for how parents can set good boundaries for their kids' cell phone use, and this article from Verywell Family also has some helpful advice.

## What does a good "invasion of privacy" look like?

It's all well and good to say that boundaries are part of life and that your teens need to have them, but what if you're seeing signs of serious trouble? If you suspect your kids are in danger or are engaged in self-destructive or illegal behavior, you are warranted in invading their privacy in order to keep them safe. If you need to, get them professional help. Also, **we cannot emphasize enough the importance of prayer**. Parenting requires an immense amount of wisdom in order to know what to do with kids who have different experiences and personalities. We believe that as parents rely on the Holy Spirit's leading, He will show them how to intervene in their children's lives.

We know a family whose daughter (now a young adult) experienced serious trauma in her childhood. The parents had gotten her professional counseling following the trauma, but as a teenager she started dealing with severe depression and hid her struggle from her parents. Because she also had some ongoing health issues, it was difficult for the mother to tell if her daughter looked poor because of her health or because of emotional reasons. The mom did suspect something was wrong, but whenever she asked about it, the daughter always said it was her health. One day when the daughter was about 17, she left her journal out and open so that the mom ended up reading a couple of the pages by accident. Those pages made it plain that the daughter was in acute emotional trouble. She was segmenting her psyche into different personalities, using violent language to express how she felt, and considering self-harm. So her parents confronted her about what they'd read.

At first, the daughter was angry and felt betrayed. However, her parents made it clear that they had not intentionally intruded on her privacy, but had only accidentally found out what was going on. The daughter now says that if her parents had snuck into her room to read her journal or had read the entire journal when she left it out, they would have totally destroyed her trust. At the same time, the parents could have destroyed the relationship if they had reacted to what they read out of fear or condemnation—if they had come down with the "hammer of justice," say, by taking away her phone, or if they had demanded she let them read the rest of her journal.

Instead, they were measured and calm, communicating how deeply concerned they were and how much they loved her. Because they led with love, the daughter was responsive and decided to stop fragmenting her mind. The process of re-associating with her feelings was painful and took time, but her parents were gracious whenever her struggle made it hard for her to cope with other areas of her life. The mom now says that the circumstance of coming across the journal was completely providential. The daughter was in trouble, and God allowed the parents to find out so they could help her get the healing she needed. And even though the daughter's "privacy" was invaded, it also led to her slowly being set free from her mental oppression so that she could flourish once more.

## If I do all this, doesn't that make me a "helicopter parent"?

A valid concern! After all, stories like those of the so-called "affluenza teen" make us leery of being so controlling in our kids' lives that they take no responsibility for themselves. For example, a woman who taught 7th grade English had a student whose mother would consistently "save" him from his poor decisions. One time, when he failed to study for a quiz and his teacher said it was time to take it, he went running to his mother, who worked at the school. Instead of letting him fail the quiz and bear the consequences, she "protected" him and even went so far as to imply that the teacher was lying about giving her son a fair amount of time to prepare.

This mother was a classic "helicopter parent" who was raising her son to not take responsibility for his actions. Helicopter parenting is a way of invading children's boundaries, controlling their choices, and removing their responsibilities under the guise of protecting them (but really only to alleviate their own anxiety and fear). It creates both unhealthy dependence as well as resentment in the children who experience it. *The New York Times* reports:

> *A survey of 455 adolescents found that teenagers who believed their parents had secretly listened in on their conversations or searched through their possessions without permission shared less information with their folks than teenagers who felt their parents respected appropriate boundaries.*

But remember, God set up our world to revolve around intimacy, being known, and taking responsibility for our actions. So our job as parents involves monitoring and mentoring our kids, imparting this biblical view of privacy and boundaries to them. Sally Clarkson, author of *The Lifegiving Parent: Giving Your Child a Life Worth Living for Christ*, says, "You don't want to be a helicopter parent, always hovering fearfully over your child, but you do want to be the always-ready jet pilot, ready to dive in when the right stuff is needed." Determining when intervening in your kids' lives is helicopter parenting and when it's necessary in order to be a good parent depends on three things: 1. Your motivation; 2. The ages of your kids; and 3. The nature of the problem.

By the time your children are older teens, assuming all is going well, your role will be more like that of a counselor, and your intervention will be minimal. One father expressed that he doesn't even desire to control all the decisions his oldest teenage daughter makes. He says he wants his kids to be "culturally nimble," meaning have the knowledge and resources to navigate the challenges they encounter. This is far better, he believes, than if they were "culturally brittle" and reacted to those challenges with fear and paralysis. Rather than control, teens need healthy accountability and room to fail safely.

Being overly controlling of what happens to our kids ***actually offers false protection***. This is because we continually shield them from consequences, from making decisions, from responsibility, from autonomy—thereby sending the message that they don't need to be responsible or face the consequences of their decisions. But as soon as they leave our homes (if they ever do), the rest of the world won't be so kind and our kids won't know how to function independently.

**Age is key.** You wouldn't treat a 4-year-old the same way you'd treat a 14-year-old.

When children are infants, parents rightfully control everything that happens to them. This control ought to decrease as kids get older. Ask yourself: Is what I'm doing helping my teens to be more responsible and independent, or am I focused on "protecting" them in a way that's inconsistent with how God protects us?

## Takeaway

Sometimes, the major struggles between us and our kids happen because we misunderstand how God designed us and our world to work. Starting from a biblical foundation can work wonders in building common ground with our kids, no matter how old they are or what power struggles we're currently engaged in with them.

Remember: Love must be preeminent in all we do. As Dr. Townsend says, "To a teen, being understood is everything." Don't underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit's leading, as well as the benefit of being in community with other parents in similar situations. With God's guidance, you can respect your teens' boundaries while still helping them mature into the responsible, flourishing adults God desires them to become.

## Additional Resources

- "Are You Teaching Kids Responsibility? 50 Simple Challenges to Get You Started," A Fine Parent
- "When to Give Your Student More Responsibility," Connections Academy Blog
- "Help yourself! 8 tips for teaching kids to be more independent," Today's Parent
- "Teaching Responsibility to Your Child," Verywell Family
- "10 Rights and Responsibilities for Parents of Teens," Verywell Family
- *Screens and Teens: Connecting with Our Kids in a Wireless World*, Dr. Kathy Koch
- *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Sherry Turkle
- *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*, Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend (also *Boundaries with Kids* and *Boundaries with Teens*)

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