

“Five Reasons Why Kids Want You to Set Boundaries for Them ”

by Jim Burns, Ph.D.

Do your teenagers really want boundaries? While I’m sure they will never seriously say to you, “Can you please add some more restrictions to my life?” they really do want to know what’s expected of them and what the consequences of violating boundaries will be. In homes where parents set clear boundaries for their kids’ behavior, kids are actually *less likely* to rebel – especially when parents take the time to discuss their expectations with them. Why would your kids want you to set boundaries for them in the first place? Let me give you five reasons.

- 1) **Boundaries provide a sense of comfort.** When kids clearly know what is expected from them, the result is a sense of comfort. They don’t have to be concerned regarding what you may or may not require of them behaviorally – or fear that you will constantly change the rules.
- 2) **Boundaries provide a sense of security.** Kids really do want to know what is right and what is wrong. They want some guidance in navigating life. Teenagers will still test the limits from time to time, but clear boundaries provide the stability and security that will allow them to thrive.
- 3) **Boundaries mark out the “playing field” for freedom.** Imagine two teams playing football – but without the playing field being marked in any way. Imagine the players having no way to tell what was “in bounds” or what was “out of bounds”. In the game of football, a marked playing field is foundational to playing the game. On a marked playing field, players know where their boundaries are. Similarly, kids want their parents to set clear boundaries for them so they can know their “playing field” – where they can roam freely “in bounds”. Boundaries, in this way, actually create freedom – and teenagers want to be able to experience and learn to handle freedom within the boundaries that have been created.
- 4) **Most teenagers don’t really want to be *totally* free and responsible for themselves at this point in their lives.** Kids who have no boundaries and are completely on their own regarding behavioral decisions tend to feel isolated and are at risk for giving into peer pressure. Kids whose parents have set clear boundaries for them, experience freedom within the boundaries and can use these boundaries as reasons to say no to inappropriate behaviors. Generally, kids who have clear boundaries simply fare better behaviorally than those kids who don’t have clear boundaries.

5) Kids want to gain their parents' trust – the trust that results from living within clear boundaries. Trust is a vitally important issue for teenagers. They aren't dumb. They know that having your trust is the pathway to greater freedom and ultimately to adult independence. Kids who don't have clear boundaries experience greater difficulties earning their parents' trust because they are left to themselves to make behavioral decisions that may or may not turn out to be acceptable. On the other hand, kids who have clear boundaries and live within those boundaries understand that they are regularly making deposits into your "trust" account. This, of course, doesn't mean that kids with boundaries don't ever violate those boundaries or ever struggle with earning or regaining trust with their parents. Most do from time to time. Still, with boundaries in place, your kids will have a greater understanding of how to build trust with you.