

To Roam, or Not to Roam?

Q: *I'm a single mom of a 12-year-old girl. I feel uncomfortable letting my preteen go with her friends to the park where I cannot see them, or walk some distance away to get ice cream—but this is what kids do in my area! I don't want to be telling my daughter "no" all the time, so I let her carry my cell phone for safety reasons. What are the right boundaries to set for her age?*

A. Every parent of a young teen asks this question. And it's that much more difficult for you since you're a single parent.

Unfortunately, no generalization fits all situations or locations. That's why it's important to talk to other parents about your community's safety issues and to listen to your instincts on what is or isn't safe. But here are some general principles to help you determine your unique set of guidelines for your daughter:

Develop a written list of dos and don'ts about where she can go and what she can do. Be sure to review it annually. Each year you should add an additional measure of freedom and responsibility.

Have kids travel in groups. A lone kid of any age is vulnerable to a predator. No one can forget the recent case in Florida when Carlie Brucia was abducted and later murdered after she walked home from school through an empty parking lot.

Stroll around your neighborhood with your child and talk through the safety issues. Secluded areas are to be avoided. Populated and lighted areas (at all points in travel) are always to be used.

Have your teen develop a short list of her safety rules (without your input) and see how savvy she is on these issues.

Together attend a Safe Kids Home and Safe Kids Out program that has tailored suggestions for your community. Read *Respecting the Gift* by Gavin de Becker, a securities expert who has written this terrific book on how to protect our kids. And teach your daughter to listen to her own body signals regarding safety and danger.

Try finding another working parent, perhaps the mother of one of your daughter's friends, with a different schedule than yours, and swap "girl dates" to cover some of the after-school time at a friend's house. Perhaps her daughter could come over to your house on a Saturday. This increases the supervised time without increasing expenses.

Finally, consider enrolling your daughter in some after-school activities that provide some enriching built-in structure.

Boy Crazy!

Q: *Help! I'm raising my 14-year-old granddaughter. Her father's not in her life, and she's so boy crazy, I don't know what to do.*

A. Do you know any male youth leaders, uncles, or church members you trust to lend a fatherly influence? Ask God to show you someone from your church who might provide a healthy role model for your granddaughter.

Then have a short chat with her. Ask your granddaughter, "How do you want to come across to boys?" "What kind of impact do you think you have on boys?" "What have you learned from other women about how you want or don't want to be like with boys?" "Who is the safest man in your life?" "How can you develop a stronger relationship with him?" Listen carefully to her responses—you may even want to take some notes as she talks.

While you're at it, why not ask your granddaughter what would make living with you better for her? Suggest she make a list of the house rules and consequences she feels are fair; then write out your own ideas about rules after you talk to some other parents of teens in your church. Then pool your lists together.

You may want to consider undergoing some brief family therapy (six to eight months) to work on how to blend your new family and how to set up rules and discipline.

Let me commend you for taking in your granddaughter. Parenting a teen can be a shock to anyone, no matter the circumstances. Be sure to tap into your support network as you raise her in the next few years. You've taken on a lot, but God will be there for you, even when you feel like pulling your hair out.

God's blessings as you go forward!

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