

MANAGING ADOLESCENT-FAMILY CONFLICT: COMMON DIALECTICAL DILEMMAS

From Dr Carla Humphrys

Dialectical dilemmas occur when extreme (or polarized) positions are taken and the path to becoming unstuck is not clear. Three common dialectical dilemmas within families are:

Being too loose vs too strict

Examples of being too loose include:

Lack of standard meal times, no requirements set regarding school attendance and work completion, lack of general behaviour requirements, no curfew, no household responsibilities, not knowing where your children are.

Examples of being too strict include:

Overusing punishments (e.g., often or permanently removing TV, internet, phone, socializing), going through belongings, spying on messages, social media etc., imposing too many limits and demand, being inflexible and giving a lack of privacy.

Desired stance:

Firm and flexible – Clear, consistently enforced rules with a willingness to negotiate on some issues (this will be different in the event of safety risks).

Making light of problem behaviours vs making too much of typical adolescent behaviours

Examples of making light of problem behaviours include:

Ignoring repeated failing grades and times spent with drug using peer group. Attributing above examples of behaviour to being “just a phase” and that it will pass.

Examples of making too much of typical adolescent behaviours include:

Thinking a teen is too focused on their friends and intervening when they are texting 3-4 friends a day, wanting to sleep over at friends houses every couple of weeks and wanting to spend 1-2 hours alone in room each night.

Desired Stance

Recognising when a behaviour crosses the line into a cause for concern and trying to get help for that behaviour and at the same time recognizing what behaviours are part of typical adolescent development.

*Just because a behaviour is happening out there among teens, does not necessarily mean it is desirable or developmentally appropriate.

Forcing independence vs fostering dependence

Examples of forcing independence include:

Providing no help with school work or social problems and withdrawing communication, time and attention.

Examples of fostering dependence include:

Restricting moves towards independence. Hovering nearby constantly, actively solving problems for their teens before they have a chance to do it themselves, micromanaging, doing everything for them, and with your teen.

Desired stance:

Holding on while letting go. Offer guidance, support and rules to help them to figure out how to be responsible for their own lives, allow an appropriate amount of reliance on others, and at the same time slowly give them greater amounts of freedom and independence.

Part of learning to be independent involves learning when it is appropriate to seek help. Teens should not be striving for total autonomy. Even world class athletes have coaches and trainers.