

Being Strict vs. Lenient

The second Dialectical Dilemma is between being Strict and being Lenient. Remember that the parent's goal with our Dialectical Dilemmas is to find balance between these two extremes.

STRICT

BALANCE

LENIENT

Being Strict

Parents on this end of the dialectic are often referred to as authoritarian. Parents who are too strict have many rules and expectations and weighty consequences for not following the rules (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). Parents on this end of the extreme often do not give options and have high expectations for performance or achievement. These parents may not give much emotional support or warmth and are focused on discipline.

There are some effective elements from this end of the dialectic. Being strict gives teenagers limitations and specific expectations. This can help teens avoid getting into trouble and promote success in school or other activities. However, this end of the dialectic also comes with some significant consequences. Being too strict or rigid prevents teens from successfully building independence. High expectations and weighty consequences can lead to perfectionism and a sense that the teen is always in trouble or is not good enough. Parenting at this end of the spectrum can prevent emotional growth and leads to disconnected or strained teen-parent relationships.

Being Lenient

Parents on this end of the dialectic are often referred to as permissive or uninvolved. Parents who are too lenient give their teens a lot of freedom and have few rules or expectations for their behavior (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). The rules that do exist may be inconsistent or not enforced. Parents on this end of the dialectic can either be too emotionally involved or warm or may lack warmth or emotional involvement. Parents who are overly warm are often described as being their teen's "friend" rather than parent. Parents who are not emotionally involved may expect their teenager to fend for himself or herself.

This side of the dialectic also has effective elements. Teens have lots of room to explore and build independence, which can lead to creativity and new skills. The downside is that teens don't have limitations or guidance, which can lead to problem behaviors. Teens with parents who are too lenient can have unreasonable expectations about how much freedom and leniency they should receive in other settings, such as school, work or relationships. Additionally, teens may feel unimportant, and the lack of expectations can lead them to feel not cared about.

Balance

Parents who find balance with this dialectic are often referred to as authoritative. These parents have expectations, rules or limits for their teens *and* have flexibility and leniency (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). In other words, parents who find this balance are mindful about the battles they pick, have clear and fair consequences and allow their teens room to make mistakes and some freedom to make their own choices. Parents on this end of the dialectic encourage discussion with their teen about his or her opinions and choices.

There are many positive impacts of this style of parenting. Teens will have both freedom to build independence and guidance to help them avoid significant mistakes. Teens will also be likely to feel valued and important and will have healthy emotional connections with their parents, allowing them to reach out to them to discuss difficult topics. These teens will be more likely to have confidence in their abilities.

Dialectical Challenges

Finding balance on this dialectic can be difficult when parenting a teen with mental health concerns. Difficult emotions such as fear, frustration or guilt can lead parents to be too strict in an attempt to control and avoid their teen's problem behaviors (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). Often the result of this is an increase in the teen's depression, anxiety or anger, worsening of the situation and persistence of problem behaviors.

Difficult emotions can also lead parents to be too lenient in an attempt to avoid triggering their teen and his or her problem behaviors (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). This, too, can lead to a worsening of the situation and persistence of problem behaviors.

At times, a parent will swing from one of the dialectic to the other. A parent may begin by being too lenient, allowing an excess of freedom. Then, when trouble arises, the parent swings to the other end of the dialectic by being too strict, creating too many rules and expectations and employing excessive consequences (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). When being too strict creates conflict or an increase in mental health concerns, the parent may again swing to the other extreme and become too lenient. Vacillating between extremes sends mixed messages to the teen and requires the parent to use skillful means to strike balance between the two.

There are many factors that make finding balance with this dialectic difficult. The following worksheets will help you consider ways to create balance.

Being Strict vs. Lenient - Balance in Action

Following are some suggestions to help you find balance between being Strict and being Lenient.

Relationship First

Building an effective and connected relationship with your teen is an important and primary factor in finding balance between being too strict and too lenient. Having a solid relationship with your teen will make setting limits and offering support easier, as it promotes mutual respect and increases the chance that your teen will talk to and work with you. Keep in mind that putting the relationship first does not mean trying to be your teen’s friend. You are still the parent. Putting the relationship first means being genuine, placing importance on your connection and working to improve the relationship.

There are many ways to build a relationship with your teenager. Here are some suggestions:

- Invite your teenager to engage in mutual interests or hobbies. If you both like watching football or going shopping, offer an invitation to do these things together. Your teen may or may not take you up on the offer, but sometimes even an invitation can make a difference.
- Be mindful of shared experiences, such as making a meal together, watching a TV show or time in the car together. Be present in moments that you have with your teen. Avoid distractions during these experiences, and use them as a chance for positive interaction.
- Laugh and have fun! There is a lot to be serious about, but it is also important for your teen to see your lighter side.
- Look for opportunities for discussion. Think about questions you can ask your teen about life and values. Find out what he or she thinks, how he or she would respond in certain situations and reasons for his or her opinions. Talk about controversial subjects, but avoid lecturing. Remember, your goal is to hear your teen’s opinions. Consider only sharing your opinions if your teen asks.
- When your teen has positive news, talk about it and ask questions to understand what happened and how it made him or her feel. Have conversations about what went well, and share your positive experiences and accomplishments with your teen.

- _____

- _____

The GIVE skill is an excellent way to build your relationship with your teenager. See the section titled "GIVE: Put Relationship First," on page 150, to bring this to life.

Focus on the Positive

In parenting teens with mental health issues, it can be easy to over-focus on what is not going well. However, over-focusing on problem behaviors and having too many rules or expectations creates a negative environment that can leave your teenager feeling discouraged. In the long term, this over-focus on the negative causes your teenager to associate you with difficult feelings and being in trouble. This can strain your relationship and get in the way of creating a supportive parent-child bond. Giving too much attention to ineffective behaviors can also actually reinforce those ineffective behaviors.

It is important to recognize what is working and areas in which your teenager is doing well (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). Keep in mind that this does not mean ignoring what isn't going well. Rather, the idea is to find balance by bringing in a greater focus on successes, no matter how small. This can boost your teen's confidence, improve your relationship and teaches the Give Myself Credit skill (see page 63).

An important first step in focusing on the positive is learning to be mindful of small improvements. It is uncommon for people to make big changes quickly. Instead, change is often made up of very small steps. If you are not looking for them, these small steps can be easy to miss.

So, what do you look for in focusing on the positive? Start by identifying target behaviors. Target behaviors are actions that you would like to see more of from your teen. The idea behind target behaviors is having specific behaviors or areas to which you will pay attention that will help you notice small changes. Target behaviors can be goals that you and your teen discuss and set or areas you think are important to pay attention to. The goal of setting target behaviors is to increase mindfulness of the positives and progress with specific behaviors.

Remember to keep your target behaviors reasonable. For example, you may feel it is important for your teen to have a clean room, but perhaps this goal is too big for your teen to accomplish right away. Your teen may make small steps toward this goal by putting dirty clothes in the hamper or making the bed. Although his or her room is not clean, there has been progress in that area. These small steps are important to notice and can become target behaviors.

Start by identifying two to four target behaviors on which to focus:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Your goal is to pay attention to these behaviors or even small approximations of the behaviors (e.g., putting some clean clothes away) and reinforce them when they happen.

Having target behaviors does not mean that you ignore other effective decisions or behaviors; instead, having target behaviors will help you notice some of the effective things your teen is doing.

Positive reinforcement is the next step. The idea is that people are more likely to do things for which they are reinforced.

You can reinforce target behaviors in many ways. Consider what your teen may respond to and add additional ideas:

- Say something simple, like “Way to go” or “I noticed how great you did there.”
- Give him or her credit: “That was such a great idea.”
- Tell your teen, “I’m proud of you for accomplishing that.”
- Make a special meal or stop to get a treat.
- Offer a reward—even a small one like extra TV time.
- _____
- _____

When using reinforcement, make sure it is clear that the reinforcement is for the positive change. Also try to be consistent in offering reinforcement and remember not to damper this positive focus with negative statements or refocusing on what is not going well. Instead, let the reinforcement stand on its own, and find another time to discuss trouble areas. Try to reinforce as soon as you notice the change or that the target behavior has been met.

Your teen may have a negative reaction to your reinforcement. Sometimes this is because he or she is embarrassed or has low self-confidence. Remember not to over-do your reinforcement, and be genuine in how you are expressing it. Despite a negative reaction, continue to offer reinforcement in small but meaningful ways.

Set Limits

The other end of the dialectic is focusing on areas that require rules or limits. Teens need boundaries and guidance. Parents need to be active in identifying and setting rules.

Just as identifying target behaviors helps you to narrow your focus, it is advisable to identify a few areas for which you wish to set limits or make rules. Choosing your battles becomes easier when you have thought about and set rules in some important areas. This also allows you to be mindful of ways you wish to be flexible. The goal is not to have rules and limits over everything, but rather to have rules and expectations for the most important areas.

Consider working together with your teen to set rules and limits. Try having a discussion with him or her, and be careful not to lecture. Ask your teen about the pros and cons of a rule or limit and in what areas he or she needs to be accountable. Involving your teen can increase investment in the rules and limits, and make it more likely that he or she will comply. Having your teen involved in setting rules is a nice way to enhance your relationship. It also promotes independence, teaches self-discipline and helps him or her see rules less as things imposed by you and more as standards he or she wishes to live up to. Listen to and try to incorporate your teen's ideas but remember that you are the parent and have the final say in rules and limits. Consider giving an explanation if you set a rule that is different from what your teen requests.

Consider including all parents and step-parents in discussions about the rules and limits. Remember that if needed, setting rules and limits can occur over the course of several conversations. If there is conflict or difficult emotions arise from working with each other, taking a break and returning to the conversation later can be an effective strategy.

List your initial thoughts about rules and limits. Remember to focus on the most important areas first:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Once the rules and limits have been determined, set clear consequences if they are broken. Again, consider involving your teen and other parents or step-parents in a discussion about consequences. Make sure they are appropriate for the rule and are not big or too small. Ruling with an iron fist tends to produce unwanted results, as teens can demonstrate more rule-breaking or limit testing.

List some possible consequences here:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

When the rules, limits and consequences have been solidified, make sure to communicate them to the household. Consider putting them in writing, and make the document accessible to all involved. Being on the same page with your teenager and other parents will help to increase consistency and make enforcing the rules more straightforward.

Remember to be consistent in enforcing the rules, limits and boundaries. In other words, follow through with your plan. Doing so will help your teens know what to expect and will teach accountability. See the section titled: *CARES: A Skill for Consistency* on page 163 to learn more about ways to be consistent.