

## Ep #92: 8 Tools to Help You When Your Teenager Wants More Freedom



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With Your Host  
**Lisa Smith**

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Welcome to *Real World Peaceful Parenting*, a podcast for parents that are tired of yelling, threatening, and punishing their kids. Join mom and master certified parent coach Lisa Smith as she gives you actionable step-by-step strategies that'll help you transform your household from chaos to cooperation. Let's dive in.

Welcome, welcome, welcome. Welcome to today's episode. I am so excited to be with you here today. Yes, I am. I am excited. Today we are going to talk about autonomy. Autonomy and teens and why it magically shows up out of the blue one day and whammies many of us parents.

So let's dig in here. Around the age of 12, many kids, many, begin to show a great need for autonomy. Autonomy is the state of being self-governing and independent. Do you feel me? You got one of those? Oh my goodness, I have a kid that absolutely thrives on autonomy. That is his number one need and probably the thing that dysregulates him the most when he feels a lack of autonomy. So I consider myself a world class expert on self-autonomy and kids.

Now your sweet little one, who for 12 years has functioned somewhat comfortably in your protective shadow, might suddenly want to make all the decisions and choices on her own and be in control of everything she thinks, feels, and does. Have you had this experience? 12 year olds are beginning to make the move to adulthood, the big move with all the independence and freedom that comes with it. They want it right now.

Many parents agree it is one of the most difficult stages of childhood to parent. Because many 12 year olds seemingly overnight start pushing the envelope, testing boundaries, defying your rules and expectations just because they can. Some even threatened to run away because they believe that they are the first 12 year old in the history of mankind to be

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totally self-sufficient, and that they need absolutely nothing at all from their parents. This inevitably provides a rich opportunity for conflict.

Now if this sounds familiar to you, you know what I'm talking about. You're there right now. You feel like it's coming, or you've been there. Let me assure you that you, yes you, are not alone. This is not only normal, but necessary. Let me explain.

Back in caveman days, way, way, way, way long ago, teenagers had to know how to hunt, survive saber-toothed tigers, and procreate to keep mankind going. They had to leave their parent's cave to find their own cave and start their own family in order for this to happen. It's part of the evolutionary process. Thankfully, the human species has evolved to where we are today in modern times.

But anthropologically speaking, try saying that 10 times over. But anthropologically speaking, the 12 year old hormones, brain development, and inner drive to become completely self-sufficient remains. To make it even harder on them and you, this need tends to ebb and flow and can turn on a dime. You know what I'm talking about, don't you? In one breath, your child may be demanding freedom. In the next breath, they may be clinging to you for affection and support and maybe even money or extra gametime.

This is the hardest part for parents of teens in this stage because their kids have one foot in adulthood and one foot in the younger childhood. The needs can vacillate back and forth completely with no warning. There's no flare going up, no SOS signal, and certainly no warning. So how do you survive this parenting stage?

Well, in today's episode, I'm going to tell you. So you ready? Let's dive in. Okay. First and foremost, and you're probably going to guess that I'm going

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to say this. First and foremost, do not, N-O-T, not take it personally. Your teen or preteen is telling you often in an uncomfortable way that he or she has a need, and they don't know how to satisfy their need on their own. In this instance, their need is for autonomy. Let's talk about some of the ways you can help them satisfy the need for autonomy.

One thing you can do is consider where can you give your teenager more autonomy and freedom to make their own choices? Like what decisions can you let him or her make? Where can you give her some independence? Where can you help them fill that need in a non-risk way? Because another thing that happens with puberty is risk starts to become more and more attractive and exhilarating. So you want to help curb that desire for risk by giving some autonomy in areas that have little risk.

Footnote, pick your battles. Consciously, carefully, objectively. Compare some of the things you're currently concerned about to some of the things that are soon coming down the pike, like driving, drinking, and intimate relationships. For instance, it may be safer for 12 year olds to find some autonomy in things like snacking or gaming than in more destructive ways like shoplifting or vaping. You may need to do some thought work and inner child healing here. Some things you're most concerned about may not be as risky for your teenager as your brain wants you to believe.

Be honest with yourself about the areas where you tend to catastrophize. Remember, your teen's experience is not your experience, nor will it be the same as the experience you had when you were a teenager. Remember, your child's experience of life is and will continue to be unique from yours and different. Particularly those of you who are working so hard to show up as a peaceful parent.

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As you will know, and may have personally experienced yourself as a teenager, I am here to tell you, dun, dun, dun, dun, despite how you parent your teenager, he or she will make some mistakes along the way. And sometimes big ones. They will hurt them, you, and maybe others. But we want to be careful not to teach our kids to avoid or be afraid of mistakes. We want to teach them how to learn and heal from them.

Mistakes and growing pains are inevitable at every stage of life, but especially the teen years. We want to be there in a place of connection and support when these mistakes happen. We want to do this work now, when they're 12, so our kids will always know they can come to us when things get hard, even in the midst of big giant mistakes.

Keeping that in mind, I want to encourage you to be careful not to punish your teenager for wanting or needing autonomy. It's important to set boundaries and limits and follow through on the consequence you put in place when they start to push past those limits. But I don't recommend you punish in the moments of surprise when your child seeks to satisfy their need for risk or autonomy in ways you've never seen coming.

I recently saw the perfect meme that illustrates this. Discipline says I'll teach you how to do it right while punishment says I'll make you regret doing it wrong. We definitely do not want to make our kids regret their mistakes, but we do want to teach them how to do it right.

This is an important time in these teen years when the hormones are coming, and the brain is expanding and developing and pruning itself and risk is coming into play. The prefrontal cortex is starting its next phase of development. We absolutely want to make sure that we're modeling and messaging I'll teach you how to do it right rather than I'll make you regret doing it wrong. Yeah? Awesome.

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I encourage you also to regulate yourself and get into your higher brain before you attempt to teach, fix, or threaten. Look for solutions instead of punishments. Children need to learn how to fix their mistakes, not pay for them. If you come down on your teenager for something like sneaking snacks or sneaking extra gametime, and I'm talking about coming down in a punishing or threatening way, then down the road when they make really, really big risky mistakes, it may feel to them that you are always angry at them, and they can't do anything right. This is the opposite of the goal you want of connection and cooperation.

Some of the limits you currently have on some less risky things would be a great place to start allowing for some more autonomy. One tool that may benefit you both is to allow your teenager to decide on the limit upfront. Then you can help him keep to that limit. You can help hold him accountable. This is a fantastic way to start to teach your teenager how to set and keep limits for himself, which is discipline and probably your ultimate goal in parenting.

Another very important tool at this stage is communication. Ask your teenager why he wants to do the thing he wants to do. What will she get out of it? Remember to use the tool tell me more. This is a beautiful opportunity to deepen your learning, understanding, and build connection. Remember, connection is when your child feels seen, heard, and valued.

Imagine you as a teenager, someone asking you help me understand. Why do you want to do this? What will you get out of it? Tell me more. Oh, I would have loved for someone to have taken a moment to try to understand what I was shooting for, or what I was aiming for, or what I wanted. Really to have dug deeper and helped me try to assess what do I want to get out of this. That, my friends, that is connection. When your child, when your teenager feels seen, heard, and understood.

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Then when she's finishing stating her case, take time to consider her point of view. Really mull it over. See it from her side. If after taking the time to think it through, you still can't agree to what she's asking for, talk to her about it from a regulated higher brain place. You can say something like I get that you believe you're old enough to do what you want to do when you want to do it and make every decision for yourself. I totally understand that you have a need to be in complete control of your own life. I hear you. I get it.

At the same time, son or daughter, your brain is not fully developed. There's really nothing you can do to speed up that process. Your brain won't be fully developed until the age of 25. The good news, though, is that you will be considered an adult when you turn 18. If you choose to move out of the house when you're 18, you will have all the autonomy you want. You will have your own job. You will make your own money, and you will take care of your own responsibilities.

In a very short amount of time, you will be free to make all your own choices and decisions. I'm so looking forward to that time just as much as you are. I can't wait to see the adult you're going to turn out to be, and I respect and understand how much you want it to be right now. But in reality, you have a few years yet to go.

So in the meantime, while you're 12 or 14 or 17, it's my job to continue to guide and support you and your needs, including your need for autonomy. I can't give you everything you want right now because I have the fully developed brain, and I can see the consequences that would come of that. But what I am willing and able to do is to give you more and more and more autonomy and freedom as I can in areas that work for both of us. So let's figure out what some of those areas might be. Then there's great exercise you can do together.



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If you're co-parenting, this will work best if your co-parent participates as well with you and your teenager. Here's what you do. You set out three bowls or buckets, and you label each one. One bucket is labeled things your teenager is completely in charge of. One bucket for things the parent or parents are completely in charge of. The third bucket has a label of things that you and your teenager decide together.

Then I want you to sit down together and write out on index cards and black marker what are the things and decisions literally right now that your teenager is completely in charge of? Maybe it's taking care of their room. Maybe it's getting their backpack ready in the morning. Maybe it's washing their gym clothes. Maybe it's doing their laundry. Maybe it's getting to school on time. Then, still in black marker, the things, and decisions the parents are completely in charge of. What we're going to eat for dinner, bedtime, whether your kid could go to the movies or the mall.

Then in another round, this time in a red marker, ask your teenager to write down on individual index cards what he or she thinks they should be in charge of. It will be interesting to see how much autonomy your teenager thinks he or she has and how much more they want.

Take the time to explain to them that when they were little, all the cards were in the parents bucket. As they get older, as they grow 18 and older, the goal is to have all the cards in their bucket. In the meantime, we have to work together on moving the cards from the parents bucket to the joint bucket and then eventually to your child's bucket completely on their own. It's a very visual exercise. It really opens up conversation and allows you to understand what areas does your teenager want autonomy that he or she is currently not getting it.



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Oftentimes, I'll ask my private clients to do this exercise with their teenagers. It always 100% of the time sparks a little bit of silliness, a few chuckles, sometimes a little bit of dysregulation and frustration, but 100% of the time it opens up the parent's eyes, the kid's eyes, and creates this very fruitful conversation of where I'm trying as the teenager to move all the cards into my bucket. You're trying as the parent to understand the cards in your bucket. We're negotiating the right time to move the cards from one bucket to the next.

I really, really, really encourage you to do this and then revisit it often. Obviously, as your teenager grows from 12 to 14 to 16 to 18 and beyond, more and more, and more of the cards should be moving from the parents bucket or the joint bucket into the child's bucket where they're in charge of more and more and more on their own, especially your strong willed, autonomous kid.

Decide how much you're going to care about your teenager's strive for autonomy. Is he telling you I need this. This is important to me. It's like my oxygen. I'm dying for some more control in my life. You can use the buckets is a conversation starter. I respect that you want more space, and you want to move out tomorrow. But the truth is, from a financial and brain development standpoint, there is a reason why 12 year olds don't live on their own. It's because they're not ready. But you are going to be ready one day, and I look forward to that.

We're going to move each year and each stage of development more and more cards from my bucket where I'm in charge of something to the joint bucket where I'm reminding you to get your gym clothes on the Thursday or asking you if you have everything you need to eventually into your own bucket where you're driving a car and completely in charge of getting yourself on your own to school each day. I know it may seem impossible now, but I promise it's going to happen over time.

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Let me throw this out to you. Some kids were just born to be adults and in charge of themselves. This is their number one drive in life. They can't wait to be in charge of themselves. This is definitely an area that you don't want to take it personally. It's just how they're hardwired. What you can do is have conversations that make this okay to want this. Acknowledge that you know he wants this, and that you're excited for him, but he's just not quite there yet.

Think of it like Thanksgiving dinner. You wake up Thanksgiving morning and eager and excited to taste Thanksgiving dinner. Oh man, it's gonna be so good. So good. I can already taste the pumpkin pie and the stuffing and the green bean casserole. But it still takes five hours to prepare it and get it on the table, no matter how bad you want it or how ready you are.

While we're in the preparation phase of getting it on the table, and a teenager, I want to be your assistant. I want to help you get ready to launch on your own. I want to help you prepare. Sure, maybe I need to let go a little bit as the parent, but we can work on this together. This is going to be an ongoing conversation between you, me, and your other parent for the next six years.

But for right now, let's get as many cards in your bucket as possible based on your age, your emotional development, your brain development, what you're capable of, what you're interested in, and what your financial resources are. You have to understand everything can't be in your bucket right now, but it will be one day. Each stage of development we can work to put more and more cards in your bucket.

As the parent, the more you get out and have a proactive conversation about this, the more you talk about it, the more you conceptualize it, the more you reassure your 12 year old, your teenager, the more he or she will

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be able to see it and understand it. He needs to feel like you're on his side of the table rather than fighting him across for it for control.

As soon as the teenager feels like you're across the table from them fighting for control, you're wanting to control them, and you're holding on as hard as you can. They're automatically going to get defensive and fight you on. That's not what you want. You want them to feel like you're on their side, and that you both can see the finish line that you're going to cross when all of those cards are in their bucket where they're completely autonomous and in charge. Yeah.

All right let's recap. Is your teen or preteen begging for more autonomy? If so, here are the things you can do. Number one, decide how much you're going to care about your teenager striving for autonomy. Remember, it's natural. It's inevitable, and it's healthy. Please I beg you do not forget that it's healthy. Number two, don't take it personally. Use the QTIP mantra. Quit taking it personally. It's not about you, I promise.

Number three, consider where you can give your teenager more autonomy and freedom to make their own choices. There has to be a couple places in their life, there has to be, where you can turn over complete freedom and autonomy to your child.

Sidenote, they also have to suffer any consequences that come from being completely in charge of something. So for example, if you decide to turn over complete control of whether they bring their gym clothes to school, complete control, and they don't bring their clothes and they get marks against them or they have a detention, they have to suffer those consequences because you've turned over the control.

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Number four, allow your teenager to choose his or her own limits in some areas. Allow him to choose. If he doesn't follow the rules, what is the consequence that happens? Then hold him accountable to it. That's the important part. Because remember, at 12 years old, you're still 13 years away from a fully developed prefrontal cortex. Number five, pick your battles. Pick your battles. Do you really need to regulate the snacks? Do you? Can you let that go? Can you let him be in charge of when he eats and how much he eats? Pick your battles.

Number six, use the buckets to determine how much autonomy your teenager thinks he or she has, how much they want, and how much you're willing to let go. Talk about the areas where you feel it's important to still be in charge. Be upfront about it, be honest while in your higher brain. Talk about the areas where he or she is completely in charge, and talk about the areas where together we can negotiate and set limits.

Number seven, keep the lines of communication open. Use tell me more, I hear you, what is your real goal? Really ask open ended questions that will not only keep the lines of communication open, but help your child feel connected. Help them feel seen, heard, and valued. Number eight, remember your child's experience is and always will be different from your own teenage experience. Do not catastrophize. Autonomy. Remember, it's natural, inevitable, and healthy for everyone. For everyone and for the growing relationship the two of you have.

Okay. I hope this helps you and gives you some tools, support, and relief. Please know that you are not alone. I see you and I get it. You've got this. I know you do. Use the eight tools. Oh, so excited for you and your strong willed autonomous teenager. It's going to be a little bumpy. Yes. But if you come back to these tools time in and time out, you're going to get to the other side. You're going to feel connection and experience incredible

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cooperation. Okay. Until we meet again, I'm wishing you peaceful parenting.

Thank you so much for listening today. I want to personally invite you to head over to [thepeacefulparent.com/welcome](http://thepeacefulparent.com/welcome) and sign up for my free peaceful parenting minicourse. You'll find everything you need to get started on the path to peaceful parenting just waiting for you over there at [www.thepeacefulparent.com/welcome](http://www.thepeacefulparent.com/welcome). I can't wait for you to get started.

Thanks for listening to *Real World Peaceful Parenting*. If you want more info on how you can transform your parenting, visit [thepeacefulparent.com](http://thepeacefulparent.com). See you soon.