

Teens and Limits

How to Give Your Kids the Freedom They **Really** Want

By Stephen Gabriel

The parents of teenagers hear much about freedom from their children. In short, they want more of it. Since freedom is a good thing, we parents are usually sympathetic with our kids' wishes and we struggle with the balancing act of granting them more privileges while not abdicating our responsibility to restrict their activities to those that are appropriate for their age and maturity. In sorting out this issue, it may be helpful to consider the true meaning of freedom and its implication for parents and their children.

Freedom means different things to different people. And the term is frequently used interchangeably with "free will." Freedom certainly doesn't mean, "doing whatever you want to do," as many people might believe. It's certainly not license as my 16-year old son suggested at the dinner table recently. Of course, he was referring to the driver's license, which he so desperately wants. Freedom is having one's driver's license! If only life were so simple.

St. Josemaria Escrivá, in a homily on freedom, referred to the rich young man who went away sad as having "lost his happiness because he refused to surrender his freedom to God." Later, in the same homily, he said that "freedom acquires its true meaning when it is used in the service of redeeming truth, when it is consumed in seeking the infinite love of God, which liberates us from all slaveries."

Freedom through surrender

It appears that happiness, the goal of freedom, is acquired through surrender.

Our Lord has told us that "the truth will make us free." What truth is He referring to and what kind of freedom? Of course, it is the truth about who we are and who God is and our relationship with God and our fellow man. It is the truth about our destiny. And He is saying that if we know this truth and embrace it, we will be free from the power of sin.

But first, we must freely surrender our will for the love of God – that is, we freely conform our will to God's will. To the extent that we have done this, we are no longer encumbered by what we want. We want what God wants. That is not to say that we have no aspirations, plans or goals. But we want these things only to the extent that God does.

So, if we don't get that job that we want so badly, after a normal period of disappointment, we accept it as God's will. We are not devastated by not getting what we want. We have been liberated by our surrender. But, paradoxically, this is not a surrender that follows defeat. It is the surrender that comes with victory. Victory over sin! Victory over our passions! Victory over our weaknesses, our defects, our bad habits. And this all

happens because Christ surrendered his will to the Father, which led to the victory of the Cross.

To sum this up, the freedom to which we aspire is attained when we surrender our will for the love of God.

Restrictions can enhance our freedom

Cormac Burke, in a recent article on freedom, poses the question, “is a person less free because he accepts restrictions?” The answer, of course, is no. And he uses the example of a person who wishes to drive from one place to another, accepting the restrictions associated with using a highway. For example, when we are driving to Chicago, we don’t feel that restricting our travel to the highway limits our freedom. Rather, we feel that our freedom is enhanced by it. In fact, if we were to leave the highway, the small roads that we would be forced to use would impair our freedom. We might even get stuck in a muddy field.

As Christians, we freely accept the restrictions of the moral law. And anyone who has been around long enough to have a few gray hairs on his head knows that the moral law of God, as articulated in the Ten Commandments, is a truly liberating law that has been given to us by a loving Father. There are far too many examples of the devastation wrought in the lives of those who ignore God’s moral law.

The moral law – God’s instruction manual

A friend of mine once suggested to me that following the moral law is like following the instructions in the manufacturer’s owners manual for a piece of machinery. If you don’t follow the instructions in the manual, the machinery will probably not work properly and it will eventually break down.

So we can think of the moral law as the manufacturer’s instruction manual. God gave it to us so we would work the way we are intended to work. Failure to follow the manual will eventually lead to malfunction.

Restrictions are not a lack of trust

As parents, we have a serious obligation to place restrictions on our children’s activities. This is an act of love on our part. We want to protect them from harm and teach them that, as adults, they will be placing similar restrictions on themselves.

Why do children need their parents to provide them with rules and guidelines and even restrictions? Because children lack the judgment, maturity and confidence to make wise decisions in many cases. As they acquire greater judgment, maturity and confidence, parents can responsibly rely on their children to employ their own free will to restrict their activities.

It is important that our kids understand that restrictions are not due to a lack of trust. We trust their integrity implicitly. We are certain that they would not intentionally do something wrong or violate our trust. Our concern is with their judgment and their ability to extract themselves from an unhealthy situation. We should tell them that this is not

meant to be an insult. Tell them: “We think you are a fantastic kid. But, you are just 15 years old and you have the judgment and maturity of a 15 year-old. We are happy about that. You are right where you should be.” We should make it clear to them that the privileges they now enjoy are due to the trust we place in them.

This is why we parents don’t allow our kids to attend coed sleepovers, or watch certain TV shows or movies, or read certain books, or hang out with unsavory people, or stay out past their appointed curfew. These things can be occasions of sin for our kids. And far from limiting their freedom, these restrictions serve to keep them free from the slavery of sin. And with the proper formation and judgment, they will someday choose to avoid these things themselves.

Sometimes it is helpful to explain to our kids that as they become leaders among their friends, helping them to do the right thing, this will be a sign of greater maturity. The more mature they are and the better able they are to think for themselves and not follow the crowd, the more comfortable you will be in granting them more privileges.

Loosening the reins; consequences to behavior

Of course, there is something to be said for learning by experience. But, we don’t send our toddler across the street alone so he can learn how to cross with the signal and dodge speeding cars. We generally err on the side of caution, making sure our child is ready to cross a busy street. As we gradually loosen the reins on our kids, they will test the fire to see how hot it is because they are weak like you and me. At that time, we can only pray that the formation and guidance provided by us will help them to avoid being burned too badly.

When our kids violate the rules or our trust there should be consequences. And the consequences ought to be proportional to the violation.

I know I tend to have a problem with the proportionality thing. When a kid misbehaves at the dinner table, I tend to jump the gun and sentence him to six months of dinner dishes with no help. I usually wind up backing off and reduce the sentence by a month or two.

So, our kids start out relying on us to enforce restriction on their activities. And we do this out of love to preserve their freedom – not to take it away. As our kids mature, they begin imposing the same restriction on themselves. And they do it out of love – love of God. And in doing so they preserve their freedom.

Our kids want limits

The interesting thing is that, in spite of the objections we may hear from our kids regarding the restrictions we place on them, they actually expect them and want them. Of course, they usually don’t realize this themselves and would never admit it. But it’s true. This fact was driven home very clearly to me by an incident involving one of my daughters.

My daughter, who was 16 or 17 years old at the time, had met a boy at the pool. We learned that the boy was the son of a congressman. And besides the fact that he belonged

to the “wrong” party, which made me highly suspicious, we figured that his mother and father were very busy socially and not around the house very much.

One day my daughter approached me and said that “Joe” had invited her to watch a video at his house, and she wanted to know if she could go. I considered the request for about five seconds and replied saying, “I don’t think you want to put yourself in that situation – being alone with this boy in a big house. Who knows where his parents will be.” I braced myself for all the objections and the pleading when she replied, calmly, “OK.”

I was taken aback for a moment by my daughter’s response. Then it dawned on me that she wanted me to say no. She just didn’t have the confidence to say no herself. She needed me to provide the limits.

Now, it doesn’t always work so peacefully. But we need to understand that our kids need and, deep down inside, want us to provide them with limits.

In my experience, if the restrictions we place on our kids are reasonable and we explain our reasoning to them, they can usually accept it. They may not like it. They may disagree with our reasoning. And they may complain. But, if they believe that we are not being arbitrary and have reasons for not allowing them to do something, they can accept the decision. This is especially true if we present our case to them calmly and with affection.

Parenting is more an art than a science. Still, it’s very serious business. If we teach our children the true meaning of freedom – the freedom that Christ won for us on the cross – and that that freedom is perfected by the surrender of our will for the love of God, they will have the foundation they need to use their freedom to chose the good as Christian adults long after they leave the nest.

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