

At this time of year many young people are marking out their territory as they move into their final years at school or beginning their first year in college or in a trade. The healthy transition from teenager to young adult is an essential process in any person's development. Some people go through that phase gradually, for others it happens suddenly, and most just get there it fits and starts. It can be a difficult time for parents trying to gauge the levels of freedom that should be granted to the older teenager. How late should they be allowed out? What kinds of responsibilities do they have at home? Are they really allowed to 'do whatever they want?'

I meet with many parents and teenagers who are trying to manage this last stage of parenting. The difficulty is that many older teenagers who are in fifth or sixth year are pushing for freedoms that parents are rightly not yet ready to relinquish. Seventeen and eighteen year olds want to be treated as adults and resist the perceived attempts of parents to control their lives. A simple rule of thumb that can be adopted by parents during this process is to assert to their children that "*We will grant the privileges of adulthood when you are willing to assume the responsibilities of adulthood.*"

An essential democratic principle is that with freedom comes responsibility. Every parent wants their older teenagers to be free and responsible. Some eighteen year olds just want the freedom but don't want the responsibility and operate on the assumption that "when I am eighteen I am legally an adult therefore I am entitled and should be free to do whatever I want!" This declaration is neither legally or ethically correct. The truth, as we know, is that many young adults remain in the family home as adult *dependents*, which brings its own set of unique responsibilities that carries into the early twenties. By law, a young adult can be a healthy adult dependent until 23.

So what can a parent say to an older teenager who is biting at the bit for freedom, and is angry at his or her parent's demands for accountability? I would suggest a parent might say something like this to, for example, their seventeen year old.

"I know we have been having fights and disagreements lately about your behaviour. I want to talk to you now about this and, for this conversation; I want to talk to you in a mature way. I don't want to scold you or give out to you. I only want to explain to you the position we are in. After I have spoken I will listen to what you have to say. The first point I want to make is that I, as your parent, have one principle responsibility and that is to get you to adulthood safely and in a position to make the best use of your life and abilities. We are almost there. It's been like a marathon run and we have completed seventeen of the eighteen laps requires. We are close to the finishing line where you will be soon ready to launch your own independent life. However, we are not there yet and my hope is that we can complete this final stage in a way that is good for us all.

I know you want me to give you more freedom. I know you want to be able to do your own thing. I know that you feel I don't trust you. I know that you cannot wait to be free. In all honesty, I want these things for you too. I want to be able to treat you more and more as an adult. I want to be able to trust you. I want you to take more and more control of your life.

The truth is that I will be glad to treat you as an adult. I will be glad to set you free. I will be glad to allow our relationship to move from parent-child to something different. But I need you help. You see here is the deal: You are ready to be a full-blown adult when you are ready to carry the responsibilities of being an adult. If, after three months, for example, you were able to prove to me that you are ready to carry the responsibilities of adulthood then I would, with a generous heart, gradually let go the reigns of parental control.

In assuming the status of adulthood you certainly accrue the benefits of freedom but you also have to carry a load of responsibilities. *Freedom gained has to be in proportion to responsibilities assumed.* That is the simple equation by which we have to operate. In maths terms its F is proportional to R!

So let us assume that by the end of this year you expect to be free to 'do your own thing' as an adult. If you were to achieve the status of a full and free adult that would mean that legally and in every other way you would carry the responsibility to take care of yourself, clothe yourself, work for yourself, and to all intents and purposes care for all your needs. We both know that will not be achieved for a number of years.

The truth is that to achieve full adult status takes time and it will take time before you are able to carry all the responsibilities of independent adulthood. So you have to think about this for yourself. What level of freedom and responsibility are you ready and able to assume. What kinds of responsibilities do you want and expect me to continue to carry? I want you to think about that. But let me help you out with it, from my perspective.

I dearly want our relationship to be built on trust, honour, and an ever increasing more adult relationship. I want to give you more freedom. But what I need from you is an adult willingness to accept a number of the responsibilities that will go with that. It's a simple quid pro quo, this for that. You give me responsibility – I will give you freedom.

So you have to understand that you cannot just *do your own thing*. You are a member of this family and a central responsibility is that you are able to respect the broad guidelines for living with this family and that, as an adult-in-waiting, that you cooperate and carry simple responsibilities like, yes, doing your jobs, earning the pocket-money you get, respecting deadlines, calling if you are going to be late, treating your siblings with respect, and, yes, showing good example. These are the responsibilities that any adult lodger in this house would have to fit in with.

And of this, have no doubt: as you show a willingness to carry more mature responsibilities you can be assured that my confidence in you will grow and your freedom will be granted. Do not doubt the honour of that agreement. But also, be certain that if you resort to immature behaviours, or childish tantrums, or disrespect and by such show that you are unable to be responsible then your privileges will be curtailed. I am sure you realise that that makes perfect sense. You act like a responsible adult then you will gradually accrue the freedoms associated with that. You act like a child then you are asking to be treated as a child.

We love you. We worry about you. All we want and hope for is that you get to 18 or 20 or whatever safely and with the best chance of having a good life. And that is why we are saying all of this. So will you think about this and we can talk again later. F is proportional to R!!"