What to say when your teenager says you treat them like a child

"My sixteen-year-old wants to go to a party with no adults there. I said no and he said "You treat me like a child." Do I give in to keep the peace?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Fine, go. Do whatever you want."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I know it feels like I don't trust you, and I get why you're angry. This one is a no, because there's no adult there. Let's work out what would make a yes possible next time."

Giving in buys a quiet evening. It also tells a sixteen-year-old that anger moves rules, and that the reason you gave was not really the reason.

What the research says

In a study of about 4,100 US high-school students aged fourteen to eighteen, teenagers described their parents, and families were grouped as authoritative (warm and firm), authoritarian (firm, not warm), indulgent (warm, not firm) or neglectful (neither). Teenagers who described their parents as authoritative scored best overall, on competence and on lower levels of problems. Teenagers from indulgent homes were self-confident but reported more substance use and school misconduct. Those from neglectful homes did worst. The study relied on teenagers' own reports at one point in time, so it shows associations, not causes.

A 2017 meta-analysis of 1,435 studies found the same direction across ages: warmth, clear behavioural control and autonomy granting were linked with fewer behaviour problems, while harsh and psychological control (guilt, shame, withdrawing affection) were linked with more. The links were small.

The American Academy of Pediatrics' guidance for teenagers keeps both halves: clear rules and consequences, and plenty of affection and attention.

What the words do

Take 2 names his anger before answering it. The no comes with the actual reason, which he can disagree with but can't call arbitrary. "What would make a yes possible next time" grants autonomy in the way the research means it: a say in how, within limits you still set.

If you live in two homes

Two homes often hold rules differently, and a child will sometimes use that: "Dad lets me." You don't have to win the comparison or criticise the other home. "That may be how it works at Dad's. In this house, the rule is the rule, and I'll tell you why." If a rule matters for safety, try to agree it with the other parent directly, not through your child.

In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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5. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.