



A Parent's Guide to
**TEEN
PRIVACY**

axis



"All human beings have three lives: public, private, and secret."

— Gabriel García Márquez

A Parent's Guide to **TEEN PRIVACY**

Table of Contents

A Tricky Topic.....	4
What is privacy?.....	5
Why do teens need privacy?.....	7
How do I help my teen become trustworthy?	9
How can I encourage my teens to honor God in their private life?	11

This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ✓ What's the difference between privacy and secrecy?
- ✓ Why does my teen need privacy?
- ✓ What are healthy boundaries in teen privacy?
- ✓ What are some practical ways I can help my teen develop responsibility?
- ✓ Why is it important to trust my teen?
- ✓ How can privacy help my teen grow?

Fueled by Generosity

Did you know that Axis is a crowdfunded nonprofit? Our resources are made possible by a growing community of generous donors. Parent guides, videos, podcasts, and other resources are completely free, connecting parents, teens, and Jesus in a disconnected world.

Find out more at axis.org/give!

A Tricky Topic

Some conversations in parenting are simple. “Don’t smoke, drink, or chew, or go with those who do,” as the axiom goes. *Get enough sleep, stay in school, say no to drugs, stranger danger, please and thank you, two wrongs don’t make a right...*

These sayings may belie the difficulties of having real conversations with your teens about drugs, sex, alcohol, et cetera. But at least those topics don’t leave much room for haggling between you and your kids. If a teen asks to start chain-smoking, the answer most parents will give is no. Making that “no” stick can come with challenges, but it’s not the kind of thing that invites compromise or meeting in the middle.

There are other conversations, though, that aren’t as cut and dry. And one of the big ones is the conversation around teen privacy.

What does teen “privacy” even mean? Is it a right or a privilege? Is it given and restricted on a case-by-case basis, or is it earned one piece at a time?

The definition of privacy can not only differ from household to household and teen to teen, but might even be different between a parent and their own teen. What a teen sees as privacy might look like secrecy to a parent, and what a parent understands to be accountability might be experienced as hovering or a lack of trust to a teen.

If there was a formula for perfect boundaries and rules about privacy and parenting, we would share it. But because that’s just not possible, it might be better to look at the question of privacy from a different angle. Rather than trying to figure out exactly how to draw what can feel like battle lines around what your teen can and can’t do in private, let’s ask this question: how can we send the message that we *want* to trust our teens?

If we start from a place where we presume that, eventually, our children will be worthy of—and even need—our trust, it gives us an anchor to return to. *How can I take action right now to enable my teen to become more trustworthy?*

We want to see our children healthy, joy-filled, and walking with God. When it comes to privacy and trust, this is the goal. With that in mind, let’s talk about how to build boundaries that set our kids up for success.

What is privacy?

In many ways, privacy is about who gets to know which aspects of our personal lives. A huge part of adulthood is knowing the difference between the public and the private self, and making good choices about what we share.

When it comes to teens, though, sometimes they don't get to make all these decisions. Parenting assumes a certain amount of veto power. We don't *want* to exercise it all the time, but we have the ability—and sometimes the responsibility—to say no when our teens demand that everything about their personal lives be off-limits.

With that said, let's establish some definitions to help us discuss what exactly teen privacy is. Privacy can generally be sorted into three categories:

- 01 Basic privacy.** This includes the kinds of privacy that contribute to our safety and dignity, like privacy when changing clothes, showering, or using the restroom. It's privacy to be unobserved when you're (physically) vulnerable, to be able to decide which thoughts you do and don't share, and to make determinations about which people feel safe enough to open up to. This type of privacy is considered a basic human right and is [even defined as such](#) in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- 02 Personal privacy.** Personal privacy can include things like "territory" (to borrow the [19th-century legal definition](#) that approximately means "my room/car/school locker and the stuff I keep in it") and communication. This can be a contentious area because a teen may feel entitled to certain boundaries that they consider "personal privacy" that a parent might decide they need to earn. (Some examples might include family members always knocking on their door before coming into their room, or being allowed to have unmonitored text message conversations.)
- 03 Discretionary privacy.** Another word we could use for discretionary privacy is "autonomy." This is the idea that you make all your own decisions about what you say, where you go, and what you do without needing to ask for approval. Adults generally have much more discretionary privacy than teens; [for teens](#), this type of privacy typically needs to be earned over time.

When we think about privacy as a “right,” we’re probably thinking about *basic* privacy. Barring extreme circumstances like placing someone under watch who has threatened to hurt themselves, everyone—including teens—has a right to basic privacy. Your teen should not have to earn the right to change their clothes without anyone watching, and it's not a privilege to shower with the door closed.

On the flipside, when we think about privacy as a “privilege,” we are likely thinking about *discretionary* privacy. Often, the freedom to go places and do things alone is something teens earn by demonstrating that they are trustworthy. Even then, there might be discretionary activities that we don't allow our teens privacy in, not because we don't trust them, but because they might be going somewhere or doing something that isn't safe for them.

That leaves us with the sticky middle ground of *personal* privacy. You and your teen will likely agree that it's good for them to have some personal privacy (maybe you don't read their journal entries or try to eavesdrop on all their conversations around the house), but you're almost certainly going to disagree on how much personal privacy is appropriate (maybe you still reserve the right to look through their phone at any time without advance notice). Defining an adequate amount of personal privacy can be tricky.

Determining that our teens need limits on their privacy is likely the easier part of parenting. A *Parent's Guide to Why Teens Shouldn't Be Given Total Privacy to Do Whatever They Want* would be a short and easy read; it's an instinct for many of us to want to make our kids' lives safer, to put more limits and boundaries on them, to give them fewer opportunities to fail. What can be harder to face is that eventually, loosening those limits becomes an important part of what helps teens grow and mature.

Reflection:

- ✓ What do you think is the difference between privacy and secrecy?
- ✓ When do you think teens should be given more privacy?

Why do teens need privacy?

In her book [Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren't Growing Up](#), journalist Abigail Shrier points out that young people today have far too little privacy. “At home, the parents are watching them. At school, they're being observed by teachers. Out of school, they're in adult-directed activities,” she writes.

In an interview with Shrier, education psychologist [Dr. Peter Gray](#) said that this lack of any privacy for our children puts them in a state of constant anxiety:

When psychologists do research where they want to add an element of stress, and they want to compare people doing something under stress to no stress, how do they add stress? They simply add an observer... if you're watched by somebody who seems to be assessing your performance, that's a stress condition.

Teens under constant observation and monitoring aren't necessarily safer, they're often just performing so they can appear to be more responsible. That means they don't get the important wiggle room that lets them grow—and that can have consequences for the rest of their lives.

Shrier notes that while bad things—bullying, insecurities, embarrassment—happen when no adults are watching, kids also learn for themselves how to deal with those bad things by being forced to practice dealing with them on their own. Similarly, if young people don't get the chance to test out the values they've been taught, good character remains a matter of head knowledge and not experience. Having the freedom to gossip with friends uninterrupted also means having the freedom to choose to be kind unprompted. Having the chance to sit a little too close on the couch on a date also means having the chance to put learning about self-control into practice and call it a night.

If a young person never has the chance to grow and fail and try again, their character doesn't get built. And the first time they're away from any monitoring eye—be that at college, in a relationship, or starting a job away from home—there's a good chance they'll either be bowled over with the weight of burdens they're unprepared to carry or swept up in a tide of experiences they don't know how to say no to.

Thankfully, building privacy into our teens' lives isn't a binary choice between letting our teens run footloose and fancy-free and adopting an Orwellian approach. The goal of teen privacy is to

gradually carve out a middle ground, where teens can begin to figure out what it means to self-regulate—and when necessary, navigate consequences while still under our care.

Reflection questions: What is a private part of your life that you take for granted? What is something you kept private as a teen that you wish hadn't been private? What's something that wasn't private that would have been better kept to yourself?

How do I help my teen become trustworthy?

Let's return to the framework from the beginning of this guide. Instead of trying to figure out exactly how much privacy teens need, when, why, etc., we'll ask the question in the form of a positive: how can I help my teen be trustworthy, and then be proactive about helping them earn my trust?

Here are some practical ideas you can try as you pursue that goal of common trust:

- 01 Model the open admission of wrongs and failures.** A teen who asks for privacy because they're afraid of a particular thing being found out is actually acting in secrecy. The difference between privacy and secrecy often comes down to the question of, "Do you have something to hide?" Helping a teen step out of secrecy requires helping them understand (by example, when applicable) that they will not be condemned for admitting a fault, though there may be consequences.
- 02 Create a privacy charter with your teen that defines privacy within the context of your family and emphasizes practical rules.** Start by asking for their input on what guidelines they think are appropriate and why. Keep their perspectives in mind as you articulate the boundaries (for both parents and teens) in your home, and encourage openness and honesty throughout the process. Include clearly stated rules about privacy—both boundaries (i.e. "*significant others may not spend the night*") and freedoms (i.e. "*Emile's journal is his private space and we pledge to honor that by not reading it*"). Your teen needs to hear and understand those boundaries (even if they don't want to), and it's also a great chance for you to learn more about your teen and what kind of rules they think contribute to a healthy home. You may want to print out a hard copy of the charter to hang in a central family location or make a virtual one that can be referenced via smartphone or computer.
- 03 Connect privacy and freedom to greater responsibility.** Help your teen understand what kind of consequences are associated with certain amounts of privacy, and work with them to make a game plan for someday taking on the full freedom and responsibilities of adulthood. One early opportunity for this might be: having your own car means you can go places you want to go with greater flexibility, but it may also mean you now have a responsibility to get your younger sibling to school, or to practice on time.

Have ongoing conversations about how your teen can earn more privacy privileges by taking on more responsibilities. Make sure these conversations have clear takeaways as well as concrete goals for your teen to pursue. Try not to think of these as rewards for good behavior, but instead as part of preparing them for the “real world.”

- 04 Loop in other adults to be part of a "circle of trust."** Just because a teen doesn't want to share something with *you* doesn't mean they don't have anything they want (and sometimes need) to share. Almost every adult remembers the fear that coming clean to mom or dad after a particularly bad mistake can cause—but also there are many awkward parts of life that some teens would just rather talk about with other adults than with you. This is normal. Having another adult around who you and your teen trust to be an extra listening ear can be a great resource for them. It can also be a great resource for you, giving you extra support in potentially difficult conversations. Family friends, mentors, extended family, youth leaders, coaches, and everyone else who cares about your kid can become a part of your circle of trust.
- 05 If you're going to limit your teens' privacy, it might be helpful to find opportunities where you can offer them transparency of your own.** If you know their phone password, you could also offer them yours. If you ask them to give you a heads-up when they're having friends over, you could return the courtesy. It probably won't always be perfectly give-and-take, but let your teen know that you're not making rules you won't follow yourself.

Reflection questions: Do you think of yourself as a trustworthy person? Why or why not? What are the qualities that make a person trustworthy, and how can you encourage those in your teen?

How can I encourage my teens to honor God in their private life?

It's been said that character is who you are when no-one is looking. Most of life is not lived out in big, public decisions, but in-between those moments—during afternoons and evenings when we're by ourselves and have no commitments.

In public, some kids might feel compelled to “perform” their faith because they know it might win them the approval of certain adults. But the underlying motivation there is not necessarily a sincere desire to grow in relationship with God. Jesus has a lot of strong words against this sort of [performative, people-pleasing religion](#).

We've covered a lot of different angles of privacy already, but one we haven't looked at is the idea of *spiritual* privacy. Our kids are spiritually nourished by private time with God—time when they can be still before Him and honestly reckon with their lives, and with their questions, doubts, and fears. In [Matthew 6:5-6](#) (NIV), Jesus said,

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Encouraging your teen to spend time alone with God helps them to create the anchors of a personal relationship with God—one that extends beyond you.

Now, spiritual privacy doesn't mean totally abandoning them to sort through belief on their own, and it doesn't mean *not* asking about how their walk with God is going. It just means our ultimate goal is that they be walking with God on their own, apart from us.

It is fundamentally through this sort of time alone with God that we become people who honor God in our private lives. When we're away from people we might try to look good in front of, and alone with the one who can see all the way to the bottom of our souls, we realize that we actually aren't getting away with anything and that we can't hide anything about ourselves. We also realize there that we are truly, passionately loved by the one who knows us better than anyone else ever can—and this sort of love transforms us.

Some parents' desire might be to restrict their teens' privacy to such an extent that there just won't be as many opportunities for them to get into trouble. In some seasons, this kind of thing might be appropriate. But this sort of external restraint is never the same thing as internal transformation. It is our personal relationships with God that foster this, more than anything else.

[Proverbs 20:7](#) says: "The righteous lead blameless lives; blessed are their children after them." When it comes to teaching our kids, setting boundaries, and creating discipline, it can be easy to treat the relationship we have with them as a closed circuit, with God brought in as a consultant. But the pattern of godly parenting isn't a loop—it's a relay. We don't teach our kids to follow God because of some personal satisfaction or to keep them in line. We are walking in a legacy of faith, and it's a legacy we hope to pass down.

The end goal of conversations about privacy is to help raise someone who is trustworthy, yes—but more than that, it's to help our teens become who they were created to be, both when people are looking and when they aren't. In other words: conversations about privacy, ultimately, are about discipleship.

Reflection questions: How would you answer the question "Who are you when no one's looking?" What are some ways you can encourage your teen to let God work in their private lives? How can you let Him work in yours?

Here are some questions to kick off conversation with your teen:

- ✔ What do you think is the difference between privacy and secrecy?
- ✔ What kinds of limits do you think teens should have on their privacy?
- ✔ Is there a difference between adult privacy and teen privacy? If so, what?
- ✔ What do you think are some problems with having too much privacy? What about too little?
- ✔ Do you think our family does a good job respecting privacy?
- ✔ What does character mean to you?
- ✔ What does trust mean to you?

Sources:

- <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights#:~:text=Article%2012,against%20such%20interference%20or%20attacks.>
- [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236657460_Towards_Territorial_Privacy_in_Smart_Environments#:~:text=Territorial%20privacy%20refers%20to,Warren%20and%200Brandeis%201890\).](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236657460_Towards_Territorial_Privacy_in_Smart_Environments#:~:text=Territorial%20privacy%20refers%20to,Warren%20and%200Brandeis%201890).)
- <https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/communicating-relationships/family-relationships/privacy-trust-teen-years>
- <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/716567/bad-therapy-by-abigail-shrier/>
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/contributors/peter-gray-phd>
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs%2020%3A7&version=NIV>
- <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-to-know-about-main-character-syndrome>