Dear Alice,

I am a teen living with overly strict parents. I am not allowed to wear tank tops, skirts, makeup, or jewelry. I can’t cut my hair and they will only let me wear it in a ponytail. My parents refuse to let me pick out my own clothes. The only boyfriend I ever had was in my dreams, meanwhile it seems like every other girl has made out with at least five guys. And sex? that’s completely out of the question; I haven’t even had a first kiss. To make things even better, I have breakouts and am not allowed to use any skin care products. I am ugly and my parents don’t care. Please tell me what I should do!

Sincerely,

fed up without a life

Answer

Dear fed up without a life,

Dating. Curfews. What you eat. What you wear. These are just a few of the many, many aspects of life that you have very little say in right now. Of course, different parents have different restrictions and teens themselves have a wide range of reactions to rules. But you definitely are not alone in feeling like your parents’ rules are too strict. As a teen approaching young adulthood, you are becoming your own person but as young children, we are more dependent on the rules and structure of our parents. How else would we learn the value of everything from brushing our teeth every night to avoiding electrical sockets? So, parents sometimes have the difficult task of figuring out which rules to throw out, which ones to ease up on, and which ones to enforce, but more on this later.

The other concern you raise is about ‘being ugly’. First and foremost, acne does not equal ugly. It’s something most people deal with at some point in their life. Breakouts are the pits, no question. The exact cause of acne is still not fully understood, but there are likely multiple factors. What is clear is that there are glands in the skin that become quite active during puberty as hair follicles are stimulated for the first time. Thus, pores can become clogged more easily, sometimes because of a mix of dead skin cells (made worse when skin becomes too dry) and excessive oil production. For some good cleaning tips that don’t involve any fancy skin care products, read the Go Ask Alice! Q&A on acne treatment [2]. Acne is often more of an issue for people in their teens to early 20s, but can impact people of all ages.
Of course, the skin treatment is only a part of this much larger conflict. You have a very normal, developmental need to go your own way in certain areas of your life. Is it possible that they are having a difficult time adjusting their roles as you mature? Is there, perhaps, some other reason they are so protective? Have you tried to understand their reasons?

Clashes between parents and teens may be made more intense by cultural differences (if your family’s culture adheres to different dress standards, gender roles, age-based expectations, etc. than the cultures that you are exposed to in school) and generational differences (your parents’ values were shaped by different times). Though it may seem like they will never come around and see things from your point of view, a little patience and persistence in communicating with them can go a long way. Here are some ideas you might try:

- **Chat a little with your family each day about daily happenings.** This shows you are actively engaged with your family and the more your talk with your parents, the easier it may be to bring up more important topics.

- **Ask for your parents to set aside time to talk with you** to have a frank and respectful discussion about your choices. Asking when there is no critical decision to be made (like permission to attend an upcoming event, for example) may demonstrate your forethought (and the stakes may not be as high).

- **Plan ahead what you want to share with them.** You might even make notes to make sure that you don’t forget anything.

- **Approach the conversation calmly and maturely.** Be clear, direct, and honest with them. Also, how you handle “no” may be interpreted by your parents as a sign of your maturity. Arguing and whining may not help you to have them see things your way. However, by accepting their “no” you may be seen as maturing which could lead to hearing “yes” more often in the future.

- **Pick your battles.** Focus on trying to change what matters most to you first. Sometimes, parents can feel like teens are unhappy with all restrictions. Find ways of letting them know you can live with many of their rules, but there are some that feel really restrictive or unfair.

- **Ask for clarification** of the purpose behind a rule if it’s not clear to you.

- **Offer a compromise,** such as:
  - “I’ll do X if you let me do Y? (basically, strike a deal)
  - “I want to stay out past 1am but you want me home by 11pm. Can we compromise on a midnight curfew??

- **If they’re open to hearing it, let them know how you are impacted by these rules** and how it makes you feel. For example, “When you refuse to allow me to have any say about my clothes, I feel helpless because being able to control some aspects of my appearance has become important to me. Can we talk about the possibility of me having more input about my (clothing, hair, and/or skin care)?? Explaining the impact on you and why it has that impact, in addition to proposing a potential solution, could be one way to open up the issue for discussion.

Hopefully, as you continue to mature, the restrictions will ease up. And with a little initiation of conversations from you, perhaps that process can be sped up.

Good luck and take care,

Alice!

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