



The author's son, Jake (far left), hanging with friends (l. to r.) Fran, Lindsay, Annie, Tony and Zach.

It seems as if a lot of people, from the President on down, want to tell my son when to come home at night. In hopes of keeping youngsters like him out of trouble, many politicians are calling for the imposition of teenage curfews. Several cities already have curfew laws on their books, and even shopping malls are placing limits on teenagers' access at night.

In New York, where my family and I live, lawmakers are considering making it a punishable offense for young people to be out on the streets unaccompanied after a certain hour. In other words, the city that never sleeps may try to put my child to bed.

Hey, I know his room smells like the inside of a gym bag and his diet consists mostly of ginseng and pork rinds, that his favorite outfits look as if they'd fit Barney the dinosaur and his favorite music comes from groups with names like We Spit in Your Face. But is my 15-year-old a felony waiting to happen? I don't think so.

Not that a citywide teenage lockup wouldn't make my life easier. It would, for one thing, remove the need for me to engage in the kind of weekly curfew discussions with my son that make contract negotiations between the sanitation workers and the Mayor look amicable. But then again, what's a mother for? If my child is going to fight with someone about his curfew, shouldn't it be me, and not the N.Y.P.D.? And if he stays out later than he's supposed to, shouldn't his dad and I determine his punishment, and not the D.A.? Why should he be subject to legislation that singles him out from the rest of the law-abiding population? He and his peers are bound to feel sulky and ill-used about being branded potential troublemakers when all they've ever done is give their parents gray hair.

A statutory curfew is stigmatizing, generationally divisive and invasive—a bad precedent. If the Government can tell my child he's no longer allowed on the street at night, can it also tell him he's no longer allowed to wear clothes that are large enough for him to live in? Can it mandate

that he stop slouching and forgetting to wear his bite plate?

A legislated curfew undercuts my authority as a parent. It also robs my child of the power of arbitration; for unlike a curfew backed by law, the ones I set are not inflexible. If my son presents a good argument for me to waive the midnight-on-weekends rule, I do. This gives me a chance to get my values across to him, to show him what I think is worth a later curfew (an organized social or school function) versus what I think is not (hanging out with his friends on the steps of the public library). It also teaches him that, in spite of the fact that I won't let him tape large

posters of barely-bikini-clad women to our kitchen walls, I respect and am sympathetic to his needs.

Some days, as I watch my son struggle with how best to manage his new young manhood—lifting weights with one hand, the telephone receiver with the other—I think that this is the exact moment in his

life when his freedom should *not* be legally curtailed. It is, rather, the time for him to

learn about negotiating limits and paying for his own mistakes, finding out what he can and cannot handle as he goes along.

And as he grows into himself, it seems natural that he should want to grow into the world as well, by making his way around town, occasionally at a late hour and mostly unaccompanied by me, whom he would as soon have along as he would have the word *dork* tattooed on his forehead. My job is to set limits, to teach him the rules of civilized behavior, to warn him about the dangers he may face—and then to stay home, with my heart in my mouth.

I'd rather the Government didn't try to assume my job. I mean if the President wants to tell someone when to come home at night, let him tell Chelsea. On the other hand, if the Mall of America wants to tell teenagers to eat pizza someplace other than in their food courts after 6 P.M. on weekends, that's their right. A shopping mall, after all, is private property—as, by the way, is my son. ■

Full Circle
It's 10 P.M.
and I know
where my son is.

FC By Bette-Jane Raphael

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What do you think? Send letters to:
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