

## WHO'S WATCHING OVER OUR KIDS?

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My first year as a single Mum was pretty scary. My kids were babies, and I clearly remember thinking 'what am I going to do when they become teenagers'. I needed to learn the skills of kid whispering and teenage wrangling quickly.

For thirteen years I deliberately set out to build an extended family for my son and daughter. Four families of friends decided to share our collective small offspring on weekends. I was the only single parent. The nine kids loved it. They shared beds, ate, played together, and learned to manage group dynamics and multiple sets of house rules. They've never had a fight, which would have to be some sort of record, and are as close now as they have ever been

As they grew up, they included their friends in their extended family. At fourteen I was worried my daughter was about to go off the rails. Her closest friend Jen showed all the signs of being into drinking, drugs and wild parties. One Friday afternoon the kids arrived home after school. I just happened to be in the kitchen.

'Where you off to over the weekend Jen?' I asked

'Party tomorrow night Jules, can Suzie come'

'Depends. Who'll be there.'

'Parents of course. It'll be all good. Josie's allowed'

'What time would you be home.'

'Dunno. My Mum doesn't care.'

Josie chimes in. 'Yeah Jules. Jen's Mum lets her come home when she likes.'

It's scary how some parents don't feel they have the right to impose boundaries. Kids desperately need them even if they're unpopular.

I began to negotiate a curfew IF they were going to go. For kids, juggling saving face and putting Mum in her place is a huge challenge.

'I know it's Sat night but I think 11 is probably late enough. You are only 14'.

'But Mum. Things will be just getting started'

'Well what you think is fair.'

'1 o'clock I reckon.'

'Try something a bit more reasonable.'

'12.30'

'Closer'

'OK midnight. That's my final offer.' She says.

'Done. I can live with that. Now Jen you'll stay here tomorrow night.' Relief crosses Suzie's face.

' Well... I wasn't planning to...'

'How about I cook you a roast first, then the two of you can come home together. Your Mum says OK.

The roast must have been edible. They were heading off happy.

'Now, what time can I expect you home?'

'Round midnight'

'No, nothing round about midnight. It's sharp. What do you think might happen if you're not here.'

'Erm, don't know.' Jen's in unfamiliar territory.

'She'll come and drag us out in front of everyone and it will be really embarrassing.'

'Would you really do that to us Jules?' frowned Jen.

I made direct eye contact with her. 'Try me!'

At five to twelve I heard the taxi pull up and the kids sneak in. The cabbies were great. They always waited for the young girls to get safely inside before leaving.

Next day

'Good party?'

'OK.'

'What time did you get home?' As if I didn't know the hour, minute and micro-second they walked in the door. As if I hadn't taken the phone to bed just in case Suzie needed to call.

Nonchalant reply 'Oh you know, round 12.'

That was the beginning. The group grew. Kids need to know that someone loves them enough to come and drag them out of a wild party if they can't extricate themselves. I would walk into the fires of hell for my kids, and their friends. They all know it. They appreciate it...later.

Jen eventually became a responsible policewoman, with a family of her own who idolise her She knows what stray kids get up to and can she sort them out. A bit of guidance, a few boundaries... a good citizen, a happy family. It's not that difficult. We all just have to care enough to act. We all need to start talking about 'our kids' not 'their kids'.