



Give Me Liberty

To step out as independent adults, children need to learn to rely on themselves, starting from an early age.

BY CHRYSTLE FIEDLER

From the time they can speak, kids tell their parents “Leave me alone!” But when trouble strikes, Mom and Dad are also the first ones they call. Knowing when to help and when to let children cope is one of the great balancing acts of parenthood, but it’s one you can manage more easily if you let kids make their own decisions throughout their lives, from the first sleepover to the day they leave home for good.

EARLY YEARS: SLEEPOVER FEARS

Check the place out during the day Before that first momentous night away from home, let kids do a little recon, spending play time at a friend’s home before a sleepover, says Dr. Alec Miller, associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. “Getting to know their surroundings and the parents of their friend develops a level of comfort,” he says.

Teach positive self-talk “Even younger children can begin to internalize what their parents would say to comfort them,” says Miller. “Cheerleading statements like ‘I can do this’ or ‘I’m in a safe house with a good friend and parents who are responsible’ can help. Over time, when these coping statements are repeated to one’s self, they’re internalized and create confidence.” Remind kids to repeat these mini-mantras to themselves when they’re feeling worried.

Tell them it’s okay to be nervous “Often, parents minimize a child’s anxiety,” says Miller.

“Instead, try saying something like ‘It makes sense why you’d be a little anxious, but here’s what you can do about it: You can call and check in, you can bring something with you, you can give yourself a pep talk.’” When Lea Blackburn, of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, sent son Jim, 4, on his first sleepover she tucked a note with their phone number into his pocket. “He never used it but just having the number gave him confidence. His nervousness disappeared right after I gave it to him,” she says.

Temper cell phone contact If you’re *too* accessible, your child’s anxiety doesn’t dissipate because he never learns to handle situations on his own. As a rule of thumb, check in regularly for the first few sleepovers, but over time discourage multiple calls, especially if it’s a one-night sleepover.

Hold a good thought “When my daughter Alexa was 8, she used to have separation anxiety. So I told her that no matter where she was, I was only a thought away, that we were always connected,” says Stephanie Rose, of Plainview, New York. “She felt comforted knowing that she wasn’t alone.”



MIDDLE YEARS: CAMP CONUNDRUMS

Make it a good match "If you have an artistic, creative child, don't send them to a summer camp for jocks," says Dale Atkins, author of *I'm OK, You're My Parents*. "Go online and see the camp. Talk to other kids who have been there. Go up and visit it ahead of time, if you can."

Bring home along "Unless your kid is a rugged individualist type, don't send him to a camp where he doesn't have any close friends," says Judy Gruen, a mom of four and author of *The Women's Daily Irony Supplement*. "Even one will do." Pack things that are meaningful, such as stuffed animals, iPods with favorite songs, video games, phone numbers, addresses and pictures of friends, along with snaps of favorite pets and their room at home. To stay connected, send daily letters or postcards. Enlist family members too. Camps also provide mail to kids through bunkmail.com.

Call when things are going well Instead of waiting for a crisis, suggests Miller, have kids check in when they're not in distress, say around midday when things are going well.

"You don't want to have them calling only when it's an emergency. Then kids may create problems in order to justify calling you."

Have the right attitude "I've heard moms say 'Were you scared?' to their kids when they've returned from 6th grade camp, which makes it seem that the time away was unnatural and something to be feared," says Brenda Sullivan, of Poway, San Diego. "We were very low-key about the time away for our twin boys and low-key about their return. It was a natural separation and encouraged. Our whole job as parents is to teach kids to be independent and productive adults and not to hold on too tight."

Build independent skills "I look at it as a process," says Vicki Caruana, a school teacher in Seminole, Florida. "First, I do things for my kids, then I do things with them and show them exactly how something is done. Then I watch them do it, and finally they do

it on their own." She used this process when she taught her son Charles, 15, how to pack. "In the beginning, when we went on trips I packed for him. The next time, we did it together, talking about what he needed to pack. Then I watched him do it."

Recently, Charles packed himself for a trip to Chicago with his school singing group. "I wasn't sure if he brought everything but I'm not always sure if I remember everything," says Vicki. "When he unpacks he'll discover if he did it right, that's the natural consequence. Then, he can build on that for the next time."

LATE TEENS: LEAVING HOME

Teach the basics "Before my son Luke went to school I gave him basic training camp in everything, from how to use the microwave, to how long it takes to boil an egg, or how to do the laundry," says Sylvia Barsotti, of Hasbrook Heights, New Jersey, a mother of three and editor-in-chief of *scholastic.com*. "It's all about getting them prepared so you feel comfortable sending them out." One of the best ways to

5 SIGNS YOU'RE HOVERING TOO MUCH

You want to be a caring, attentive parent. That's a noble urge. But you're probably overdoing it if...

- You fight all their battles for them. Older kids need to deal with their own library fines, write their own papers, earn their own playing time.
- You wake them up every morning. This is one of the most important skills to teach early on. They've got to show up for life.
- You remind them constantly of the time. Let them be late and deal with the consequences. They'll need that knowledge in the real world.
- You call their cell phones multiple times a day. Calling out of serious concern is fine. Calling out of idle curiosity is not.
- You do all their laundry for them. They're capable of doing their own as soon as they hit puberty.

teach teens to become more responsible and independent is to have them pick two chores (make them gender-free) they don't mind doing, like emptying the dishwasher, kitchen cleanup, or helping with laundry. "Giving your kids age-appropriate responsibilities around the house not only helps them grow into adulthood, it teaches them practical things they need to know to be an adult," says Susan Kuczarski, author of *The Sacred Flight of the Teenager: A Parent's Guide to Stepping Back and Letting Go*. Household chores shouldn't be tied to allowance, she adds. "Everyone needs to pitch in and help get the family to-do list done."

Find the right fit for them There are different degrees of independence and colleges to match. "It all comes down to knowing what your kid is capable of handling, and what they need help with," says Barsotti. Her daughter Julianna, 19, is

street smart and better at navigating on her own so she chose an urban college in Boston. Her son Luke, now 23, needs more of a blueprint. "He went to a small college with a structured campus. The same approach won't work for every child," Barsotti says.

Get teens involved in admissions Melissa Havard, of Beverly Hills, California, did this with her 17-year-old daughter, Katie. "I told her, 'I'm here to help but it's your responsibility to meet the college application deadlines.'" Once your child is accepted, have her follow up by calling the admissions office to arrange a visit.

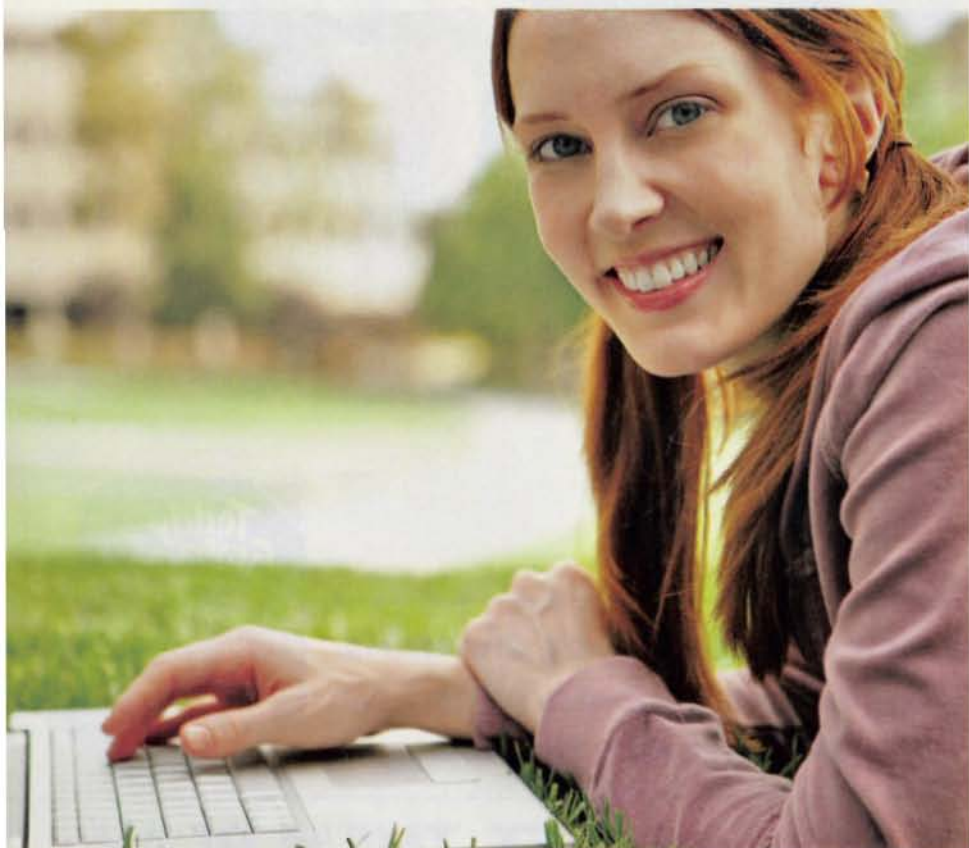
Let them handle their own appointments Starting in the senior year of high school or the summer before college, have your teen begin to make her own doctor's and dentist appointments. "Once they get to college they're going to be in charge of their own health care," says Karen Levin Coburn,

co-author of *Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years*. "If they never made a doctor's appointment before, their first instinct will be to call home."

Discuss academic goals "Students have been working so hard to get into college that many of them just show up without thinking about why they're there," says Coburn. To encourage them, ask questions like: What do you hope to get out of this? What are you hoping to make happen? What do you hope to explore? This is a good way for kids to take ownership of their education.

Think of yourself as a coach Help kids be independent by making them learn about resources available on campus, says Coburn. If your child calls up with a late paper or roommate problem, instead of trying to fix it, listen, then offer suggestions, such as, "I bet there's a writing center on campus. Have you tried going there?" Or "Have you talked to your resident adviser about the roommate problem?" Try to encourage *them* to take action. ☺

By coaching their children instead of doing everything for them, parents can help kids develop problem-solving skills.



PHOTOS: VEER