

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 leave home for good.

Tell your child it’s okay to be nervous. “Often, parents minimize a child’s anxiety,” says Dr. Alec Miller, associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Instead, try saying something like “it makes sense why you’d be a little anxious, but here’s what you can do about it.” Offer helpful suggestions to help ease his anxiety.

Teach positive self-talk. Statements like “I can do this” can help. Over time, when coping statements are repeated to one’s self, they’re internalized and create confidence. Remind kids to repeat mini-mantras like this to themselves when they’re feeling worried.

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. Instead of waiting for a crisis, have kids check in when they’re not in distress. You don’t want them calling only when it’s an emergency. Then kids may create problems in order to justify calling you. As a rule of thumb, check in regularly, but discourage multiple calls.

Have the right attitude. Statements like “were you scared,” after any normal event makes it seem that the occasion was unnatural and something to be feared. Be low key. 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. “This is 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. 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.”

Teach the basics. How to use the microwave, how long it takes to boil an egg, or how to do the laundry. “It’s all about getting them prepared so you feel comfortable sending them out,” says Sylvia Barsotti, of Hasbrook Heights, New Jersey, a mother of three and

editor-in-chief of *scholastic.com*. One of the best ways to 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 Kuczmarski, 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.”

Think of yourself as a coach. Help kids be independent. If your child has a late paper or a problem with a friend, instead of trying to fix it, listen, then offer suggestions. 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.

Five 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, and 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 phone 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 laundry as soon as they hit puberty.

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