

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids: A Letter for Parents by the NYU Child Study Center



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INDICATORS OF INDEPENDENCE

How do I know when my child is ready?

Developing independence is an important goal for children and adolescents. As children pass through developmental stages they acquire new sets of cognitive, social, and emotional skills that foster their independence from parents and reduce their need for adult supervision. Ultimately, families work toward transitioning their child successfully into living independently. Along the way, however, parents have to make important decisions about when their children are ready to do certain activities on their own, such as sleeping over a friend's house, staying home alone, and going on a date. Parents can facilitate their children's independence by understanding developmental milestones and learning how to safely and gradually withdraw adult supervision.

Recognizing Developmental Milestones

Children tend to grow and develop in a universal and predictable way. However, factors such as a child's environment, culture, health, and individual traits can affect the rate at which development occurs. Normal variation in development can extend across two chronological years or two grade levels. Understanding that children develop at different rates helps parents feel less pressured when their child's peers engage in activities for which their child may not be developmentally ready.

Middle Childhood (6 - 11 years-old)

Middle childhood is marked by many signs of independence. During this period, children can dress themselves, help with household chores, and leave home for several hours a day to attend school. Along with their increased autonomy, their social, emotional, and cognitive skills are also rapidly developing. For example, children between the ages of six and eight are forming a stronger sense of right from wrong and beginning to think about the future. In addition, their social networks are expanding as they increasingly show a desire to make friends and feel accepted. As they grow and change, they are integrating their new abilities and friendships into how they see their roles at home and at school.

In the next two years, from ages nine to eleven years, children continue growing in similar areas but changes tend to be more complex. Although same sex friendships become a vital emotional part of their lives, children of this age almost always align with their parents' beliefs and values. This is an important time for parents to instill responsibility as well as provide support. Peer pressure is becoming more critical, and children who feel good about themselves are able to make safer choices. During middle childhood parents may begin to consider having their child participate in extended play dates, supervised sleepovers and, during the latter ages, supervised group outings including movies, shopping, playing at parks, and dining. Important indicators of readiness include whether the child is effective at asking for help, separates without anxiety, and exhibits positive peer interactions for an extended period of time. Intermediary steps include going to the mall or the movies with your child and to agree to go your separate way until a set meeting time.

Early Adolescence (12-14 years-old)

Early adolescence is marked by both emotional and physical changes. Physically, adolescents experience rapid growth in height and begin to develop secondary sexual characteristics. Emotionally, adolescents can become very concerned with their physical appearance and attractiveness and may worry about being rejected by their peer group. Concerns about body image, anxiety about increased school demands, and depression are vulnerabilities associated with early adolescence. However, these adolescents are better equipped cognitively than before to navigate challenging situations. They are better at complex and abstract thinking, have developed a more solid sense of right and wrong, and are more adept at using language to express themselves.

During early adolescence, parents continue to play a large role in teaching responsibility and ethics by setting and enforcing limits as well as by being good role models. Young teens typically can be found spending time at friends' homes, babysitting younger siblings, riding their bicycles or skateboards, and "hanging out" in public areas with little to no supervision, depending on the safety of the setting and the maturity of the child. Adolescents during this stage commonly use cell phones to stay in touch with friends as well as check in with parents during independent outings. Important factors to consider include whether you are comfortable with your child's peer group and confident that your child understands and follows limits and rules, will call to check in, and is able to safely navigate their environment.

Middle Adolescence (15 – 17 years-old)

By middle adolescence, your teen has begun to focus more deliberately on matters of independence. At this age teens are on their way to forming an identity based on personal values and beliefs. Generally, older adolescents spend less time with their family and more time with their peers. They navigate a complex social world where they are exposed to various social demands and pressures. These teens make important decisions surrounding risky behaviors including drug and alcohol use, sex, and aggressive or violent behavior. Parents are faced with the challenge of helping teenagers remain safe and focused on school achievement, even though they spend much less time under adult supervision. At the same time, parents of teens must learn to appreciate how critical their child's social life and growing independence is to healthy development. Middle adolescents have continued to grow cognitively; they have an easier time telling right from wrong and have more advanced reasoning skills. Typically, at this age, teenagers can be expected to spend time with each other in more adult-like settings such as concerts, late movies, and parties. Since they often have access to cars and spending money from part time jobs or allowances, teenagers are able to travel and socialize independently. Many teenagers experience intimate emotional and/or physical relationships with a dating partner.

Despite these changes, teens do not have adult judgment and they still need parents to monitor their social activities, schoolwork, and health related behavior. Creating and enforcing limits that are appropriate to your teen's level of independence is very important. Teens who meet academic and parental expectations, exhibit good decision making and problem solving skills, and manage to balance social and academic demands are more adept at the next phase of independence.

What can parents do to prepare children for unsupervised situations?

How parents talk with their children and structure time at home have a strong effect on how children make decisions when they are not by their parents' side. Following are some suggestions for building a foundation for safe and positive decision making in unsupervised situations:

- Make time to talk to your child and ask about school, individual achievements and peer relationships. For the young child, be actively involved in meeting your child's teachers, participating in school events, and arranging peer activities. For older children, continue to talk about school and friendships and encourage participation in extracurricular activities.
- Foster a sense of responsibility and talk about the importance of taking pride in accomplishments. Begin with simple household tasks and homework completion. Older children may benefit from volunteering in the community or holding after school jobs. Model these behaviors and give yourself labeled praise for achieving personal goals.
- Know who your children's friends are at all ages and let your child talk openly about his or her friends. Discuss topics like bullying, peer pressure, smoking, alcohol, etc. to help your child develop a sense of right from wrong. Help your child plan what can be said or done to avoid or exit unsafe or uncomfortable situations with peers. Share your own experiences and how you were able to get through them.
- Spend time with your child engaging in activities and meals together. Show affection and interest, respect their opinion, and listen to ideas even if they may be different from yours. Parents who have a warm relationship with their child while still enforcing clear limits are more successful in fostering safe decision-making.
- Set clear limits and guidelines for behavior at home and when spending time with peers. With adolescents, clearly define rules for health risks such as substance use, sex, and violence. The older your child is the more you can encourage his or her input when negotiating rules and regulations. In fact, it's a good way to model how to use judgment and reasoning to make choices that are safe and appropriate.
- If you are concerned that your child is engaging in unsafe behaviors or is not meeting appropriate developmental milestones, talk to your child's school or an outside mental health professional about your concerns.

Developing children and adolescents are faced with many challenges as they navigate a complex social world. Despite their growing independence, children and adolescents still need parents to guide their choices and model positive behavior and lifestyle choices. Ultimately, parents who have a warm relationship with their children and enforce appropriate limits on behavior are most likely to raise children who are confident, self-respecting, and capable of handling themselves in complicated situations.

Useful Resources and References

Following are resources for families interested in learning more about how they can determine when their child is ready for their next step toward independence.

- Gallagher, R. J. (2003). *Facts and tips for parents: Managing the middle school years*. Childcare Inc.
- Gallagher, R. J., & Rosenblatt, J. (2001). *Facts and tips for parents: Supporting your teen*. Childcare Inc.
- <http://www.kidsgrowth.org/stages/guide/index.cfm>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/default.htm>

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Giving Children Back Their Childhood

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