

How To Tell When A Child Is Ready For More Freedom Or New Privileges

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Children's personal safety involves a delicate balance between adult supervision and children's independence. "Is my nine-year-old old enough to walk to school?" a mother asked during a Parent Education workshop earlier this week. As I talked with her, I realized that although this woman, her child, and their life situation were unique, her question reflected a common concern expressed by many adults from all walks of life caring for children of all ages.

I have rarely left a Parent Education workshop without addressing at least one question with the structure, "Is my [AGE]-year-old old enough to [NAME OF ACTIVITY]." For example:

"Is my six-year-old old enough to play in the front yard on her own?"

"Is my ten-year-old old enough to walk to the store on her own?"

"Is my thirteen-year-old old enough to ride public transportation on his own?"

Each of the questions about children's personal safety above rests on the underlying assumption that there exists an actual age at which children in general are ready to manage certain activities independently and safely. In our search to identify the appropriate age for the activity we are considering, we can find ourselves looking to the parents of our children's peers and making the decision that "most parents" we see seem to be making. We might even find ourselves downplaying our own uncomfortable feelings -- "I must be too protective if the other families are letting their kids walk to school" -- rather than examining them.

When we, as parents and caregivers, reframe questions about children's personal safety as skill-based questions rather than age-based ones, we can be far more effective in deciding what is best for the children

in our care and far more confident in our decision. When considering a new freedom for a child, we can ask ourselves, "Does this child demonstrate the skills s/he needs to play in the front yard alone?...to walk to the store alone?...to ride public transportation alone?"

To answer this question, we need to make an honest assessment of the reasonable risks presented by the activity we are considering. Then, we can ask ourselves if the child demonstrates the capacity to take action to prevent, avoid, deescalate, or escape those risks. We also want to think about where the child could get help if s/he encountered one of these risks.

For example, a child walking to school on his or her own will quite likely face risks presented by cars. This risk will be different in different neighborhoods and will be affected by the number of cars, the speed at which they travel, the absence or presence of sidewalks, the number of intersections the child will need to cross, and the overall safety of those intersections.

The child walking to school might also encounter potentially dangerous attention from others, either strangers or people they know, such as groups of older children engaging in bullying behavior. Children walking in an urban area may live in a region with a higher rate of crime but might also be walking along a road with an abundance of open stores and restaurants they could enter to get help. Children walking in a rural or suburban area may live with a statistically lower rate of crime but, if faced with an emergency, may have to run quite a distance in order to reach a place where they can get help.

After assessing the level of children's personal safety risks, we can then ask ourselves skill-related questions such as the following, which relate to the example of walking to school: Does the child in my care walk with awareness and confidence, or does this child tend to get dreamy or lost in thought? Does this child consistently demonstrate safe behaviors in interactions with strangers? Does this child demonstrate skills to stay safe around cars, such as crossing at marked intersections, looking both ways, and waiting for the light to change? Finally, does this child take charge when feeling uncomfortable by getting help when necessary, even when that means inconveniencing others and being persistent until help is given? Children's personal safety, like adult personal safety, relies largely on a willingness and an ability to get help when it's needed.

Incorporating success-based safety practices into our everyday lives with children can increase our ability to assess their level of skill while we are also helping those skills to develop. We can answer children's demands for more freedom with skill-based, matter-of-fact statements: "I will feel more confident letting you walk to school when I see that you are walking with awareness and confidence out in the world... When I believe you are ready to follow our safety rules about talking with people you don't know when you are on your own.... When I know that you know how to get help if you need it." Then, PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE by role-playing so that your child has the chance to develop these skills in a positive, success-based learning situation!

Once we make a decision about whether or not to give a child greater independence, we may still compare our decision with the decisions other parents and caregivers are making about the freedom of their children. This can, at times, lead to valuable insight. It can also lead to uncomfortable feelings, especially if our decisions are different from everyone else's.

Children's personal safety, however, is more important than our own uncomfortable feelings, and when we make decisions about independence for our child based on risk and skill assessment, we can feel confident that we made the best possible decision for our own, unique child.