

Letting Go

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Remember?

You're jogging along, out of breath, excited and fearful all at once. One hand grips a handle bar and the other supports the small of a back. She's grinning and pedaling faster and faster, ever more confident and you run faster and faster until you or she or both give the signal and you let go, panting, watching, proud and scared, as your momentum and her determination carry her a dozen yards before she topples.

Knees scraped. Ego bruised. Trying not to cry.

But you're there, applauding the success, dusting her off and helping her back on. Your heart's still racing but you're ready to go again. "You can do it!" you cheer even as you grit your teeth, ready for another tumble, and another try after that.

This scene is familiar even if your son or daughter doesn't ride a bicycle. Change the props, shift the setting and you're talking about the constant drama of growing up, a dance of ambivalence that every parent-child pair faces every day across the generations. No parent wants to let go and yet every parent must let go. No child wants to grow up and away from home and yet every child craves independence. Every one of your daughter's demands for freedom and privilege has its own equal and opposite wish to be held close, just every one of your attempts to hold her close has its own equal and opposite push for her independence. Two steps forward, one step back.

Growing up is about learning to do the dance of ambivalence. Do you drive a car? Do you always obey the speed limit? Probably not. Very few drivers do. Chances are that even though you allow yourself an extra ten or fifteen miles per hour above the posted limit, you're still glad that it's there. How would you feel if there were no speed limits? No traffic police or highway patrol? That mix of exuberant, "Yes! I can drive as fast as I want!" and fearful, "I'll never drive again! The roads are no longer safe!" is exactly how your kids feel about the limits that you set.

Your job is to set limits. The limits you set for your child are statements about letting go. Your clear and consistent expectations about bedtime and curfew and diet and peers and grades and safety and respect (and ...?) all work together to say, "This is how much independence I will allow you."

Like speed limits, the limits you set are simultaneously reassuring and aggravating. And like speed limits, you can expect your kids to test your limits a little at a time until they get caught.

Make the consequences predictable. In some states, highway speed limit signs spell it out exactly. They say, for example, "The speed limit is fifty-five. If you're caught driving

between fifty-six and sixty-five, you will be fined two hundred dollars. If you're caught driving between sixty-six and seventy-five, you will be fined five hundred dollars."

When you decide to drive seventy miles per hour, you know that you're taking a risk. If you're stopped, you know exactly what the cost will be. There can be no confusion. The world is predictable and predictability helps us each feel safe.

Calm, cool and collected. Okay, so you're late. You take the risk of driving seventy. Blue lights suddenly flash in your rearview mirror. Now you're going to be very late. The police officer who approaches you doesn't take your offense personally. He (or she) knows that his emotion will only spark your emotion and nothing will be gained. He is matter-of-fact, calm, cool and collected. "Good afternoon Sir. Are you aware that you were driving seventy miles per hour? Are you aware that the limit here is fifty-five?" He writes out a ticket for five hundred dollars just like the sign promised, reminds you to drive safely and wishes you a nice day.

You should do the same. Post your expectations and the associated consequences clearly. Follow through consistently and with a minimum of emotion. If you take your child's misbehavior personally, if you are already running on empty and get mad or sad or scared when she tests your limits, your emotions will charge up her emotions and the exchange will become louder and less constructive by the second.

And when you find yourself ready to explode? Don't. Model healthy management of your own strong feelings. Try these three steps: (1) Identify the behavior that you're responding to: "You know that your curfew is eight o'clock." (2) Clarify about your emotions: "I'm too scared and frustrated right now to talk to you about it." (3) Establish when you will follow through: "I'll be able to think better in the morning. We'll talk about consequences at breakfast. Now let's get some sleep."

You must follow through. Once you're both calm, it's time to follow through with the predictable consequence. She may whine or cry or threaten, she might look for loopholes or make empty promises or try to rationalize her way out of a consequence, but to give in is to undermine her security. Letting her get away with something "just this once" says that you're not really serious about your limits and consequences. You're not holding her up as she pedals down the street and you might not be there to pick her up when she falls down and scrapes her knee.

Reward successes first. Those fancy speed limit signs are missing the most important part. They should say, "If we catch you routinely driving fifty-five miles per hour, we will give you five hundred dollars." Wouldn't that incentive be enough to help you obey the speed limit?

The same is true in your home. If you become little more than a policeman, consistently punishing violators in your calm, cool way, you will teach your kids that the best way to win your time and attention is to become a violator. In effect, when only the squeaky wheel gets the oil, the wheels will compete to squeak the loudest.

You must recognize your kids' successes and their reasonable efforts to succeed even more loudly than you respond to their failures. Once you start taking compliance and success for granted, it will begin to disappear.

And after? Her knees are nearly healed and she's finally riding unassisted. You don't expect her thanks, there's enough reward for you in simply seeing her succeed. But the job is just begun. Now you must let her know where she can ride and under what conditions (always wearing a helmet). It's time to let her know what will happen if she can follow these rules (she'll earn more privileges, a new helmet or bike) and if she chooses not to (she'll lose bike privileges for a week).

She's going to test the limits. She's going to ride further or longer than you've allowed and you'll be there, just like when she fell, to follow through calmly and consistently. Her tantrum is an occasion to talk about anger, not about biking. In this way you're building her security and being the best parent that you can.

----- **Parenting Pointer** -----

Do you already feel out of control? As if the kids are running the house? It may not be too late to turn things around. Try this:

1. Call a family meeting.
2. Ask the kids to write out everything that they wish for, one item per index card. Help them to identify some small things (later bedtime, extra desserts, computer privileges, being driven somewhere) as well as large things. Wishes may be privileges and do not need to cost money.
3. Meanwhile, you and your co-parent(s) write out your expectations, including some smaller things (making beds each day, doing dishes) and some larger things (improving grades).
4. Spread the kids' cards and the parents' cards across the floor and negotiate matches. "If you do this," you might offer, "then I'll do this."
5. Test the system by agreeing to just one or two "if ... then" contingencies. Once you have success with those, meet again to negotiate others.