



ASK DR. DANA

Q. How much freedom should I give my 10 year old?

A. I like this question because it echoes a deeper question we parents are starting to ask ourselves. Are we over-parenting our children? In a Times.com article, Nancy Gibbs recently wrote about the backlash against over-parenting and helicopter parents. Gibbs says, "Less is more; hovering is dangerous; and failure is fruitful. You really want your children to succeed? Learn when to leave them alone. When you lighten up, they'll fly higher. The way kids learn to be resourceful is by having to use their resources."

As for the specifics, I do not have an answer to your question. As a parent, the amount of freedom you allow your child in terms of walking to school or a friend's house alone, playing outside unsupervised, staying home alone, etc. depends on your child's personality, level of maturity, and his or her interest in testing his independence in these areas. What I do know is that in-depth discussions of safety plans and how to handle various situations are necessary. Children's independence should start small and build on their success as they grow more confident and mature.

I will admit here that my husband and I recently started to leave my 4th grader alone while we walk our dogs around the block (about 15 minutes). I will also admit that I hesitate to tell my friends and neighbors for fear that they might "not agree" (read as--they may not approve of my decision). There seems to be an underlying belief that if we let our kids out of our sight we are bad parents.

Yes, there are risks with giving our kids' freedom, and we have to do it thoughtfully, but the greater risk may be underestimating the cost of over-protecting our children.

Over-protection can:

- Prevent children's resiliency
- Reduce children's ability to deal with and overcome frustration
- Result in a lack of personal responsibility and accountability
- Reduce self-esteem and children's pride in successfully dealing with difficult situations

How much freedom or independence do you give your kids? How do you decide? What parenting judgments do you feel and react to? These are questions we need to ask ourselves and perhaps each other. What do you think?