

Letting Go of Tweens

By Judy Arnall

Kaori's eight year-old daughter, Rin, answered the door one day and found her little grade three friend asking her to go play at the park down the block. The little friend was alone. Kaori replied that they would love to go to the park and will meet her there in 15 minutes. The friend had a puzzled look on her face when she realized that not just Rin was coming, but the mom too. Kaori wondered whether she was too protective or she should let her daughter skip off to the park alone with her friend. How do we balance our parental need to protect and keep our children safe from harm, but trust our children to grow in independence and make decisions for themselves?

It seems that children are always ready for the next step of independence long before we are. They ask us to take the bus alone for the first time, or walk to the mall, or go the park alone with a friend. From the moment they are born, they move away from us (literally) in small baby steps, until they are 18 and move to a university on the other side of the country. We wonder, did we cover everything? Did we teach them all they need to know about safety, health, and good home and money management? Parenting is one continual job of letting go and letting children learn. But when is the right time? Do we do it all at once or in baby steps?

Society is making it harder for parents to let go. Even if parents are comfortable allowing their child independence, because they know their child best, society casts judgement on them. News outlets, other parents, and strangers foist their child-rearing opinions on the rest of us, and call the child protection agencies or at the very least, make snarky comments on social media about our "bad parenting." The world is statistically safer for children today, yet, our society is more paranoid than ever. There are not many children at the park today without a cellphone as their lifeline to parents, instead of being allowed the opportunity to problem-solve their issues from bullying to stranger danger, without a parent's advice.

The problem is that children need us to let go. Privacy laws are putting a deadline on parenting. When our children reach the age of 18, the world expects them to handle all of their medical, educational, financial, and logistical aspects of their life, all by themselves. Parents are no longer consulted and are often considered the major force that institutions must shield children's information from. Thus, children must be prepared for an adult life of personal assertiveness and advocacy, long before 18. So when does this happen?

Parent Authority

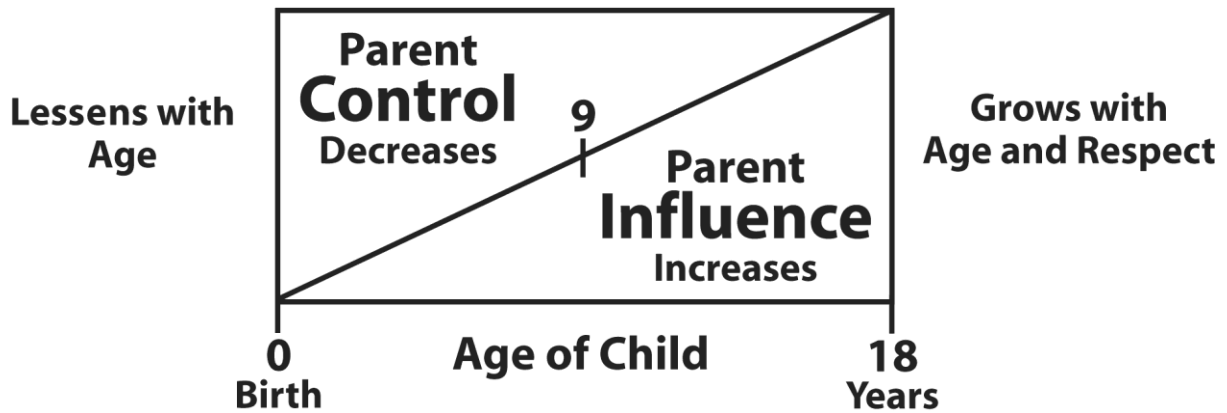


Fig.1 Excerpted with Permission from *Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery*

If you look at the P.E.T. (Parent Effectiveness Training) model of control and influence, created by Dr. Thomas Gordon, you will see that by the age of 9, children are halfway to adulthood. Age 12 is the two-thirds mark. By age 12, children are beginning to grow their abstract thinking skills and that is the time parents should start grooming their children to think about consequences, and allow the child decision-making and independence, offering coaching and guiding if the child consents. Of course, in order to do this, parents need children to listen to their influence. Children will listen to parents during the teen years, if a solidly respectful relationship has been built. That means no punishment (not even "consequences" or withholding electronics), lots of active listening and many, many practices of parent-child problem-solving. Punishing children does not build parental influence. At age 12, the child is in the last one-third of parenting and it's time to start treating them as the grown-ups they are becoming.

Will the children make mistakes during those last six years? Yes! However, mistakes during these years are great fodder for learning and 99% of those mistakes do not have lifelong consequences, unlike mistakes made in the adult years. Children still have parents close by to help problem-solve and be the supportive pillow for children to fall into after a mistake.

And when children go off to university across the country at 18, they will have the confidence, experience and skills to figure out for themselves the logistics of living a safe, healthy and rewarding life. They will be practiced in facing problems and figuring them out. Even though parents are not controlling their children's lives, they will enjoy the huge influence they will have on their adult children. I love the

times my sons' emails, texts or phones to ask my advice. That is the power of influence!

The key is trust. Kaori 's parents trusted her to be okay when she moved to North America from Japan at age 18. She wants to give her daughter the same gift of trust. Kaori still went to the park with her daughter, but considered that between age 8 and 12, she would let her go on her own. She knew her child best and would decide when that magic number would be.

Judy Arnall is a non-punitive child development expert, mom of 5 teens, and bestselling author of *Discipline Without Distress* and her latest book, *Parenting With Patience*, which has just been translated in Chinese. Join her free live webinars from Calgary's Child magazine, the third Thursday of every month at 8 pm across professionalparenting.ca/webinars.html