

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Letting Your Kids Learn To Be More Independent

from the American Counseling Association

At this time of the year, many parents find themselves stressed as they watch their children become more independent. Summer's over and that son or daughter is heading off to college for the first time. Or maybe a teen is now entering high school, or a younger child is involved in a sport with older kids, but suddenly you see your role as that all-important parent becoming much smaller.

While we all want to protect our kids, we also have to recognize that a normal part of the development process is for the child to grow separate from the parent, to make more of his or her own decisions, and yes, to sometimes make bad decisions.

It can be difficult to realize that "mommy and daddy" aren't needed as much as they once were. For some parents, accepting that growing independence is extremely difficult and the parent may hold on too long and try to do too much. The result can be a child who is going to have a hard time making his or her own decisions, and in accepting the consequences that come from those decisions.

It can also result in children who suddenly become rebellious as they recognize their desire to be more independent, but find themselves being constantly led by someone who wants to make all the "right" decisions for them.

So is the answer simply to back off and let your child run free? That's not a condition any parent would welcome. Rather, what you want to do as a parent is recognize the ways in which your child is growing and becoming more self-sufficient, and then identifying opportunities when you can help them move the process forward.

Yes, sometimes you do have to let your child make a bad decision. The consequences that come from such decisions are part of the learning and growing process. While you still want to be there to keep horrendous things from happening, letting minor fails occur will help ensure that better decisions are made in the future.

The role of a parent in a healthy relationship with the child is to be there when help is needed or when guidance is requested, but not to be a stopgap against possible bad decisions. It's fine to offer sympathy and understanding when something goes wrong, but smart parents don't always jump in to make it right.

Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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