



Why do we fear giving teenagers their independence?

Teenagers Photolibrary.com

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New research reveals that teens feel overprotected by parents. Here the experts give their views on appropriate freedoms

When you read that secondary school teachers are complaining that their pupils don't even own proper coats because they never walk anywhere, it's probably time for parents to examine whether they are overprotecting their children.

New research by the Children's Society reveals that children resent being wrapped in cotton wool. More than 12 per cent of the 12 to 15-year-olds surveyed said that they were unhappy with the amount of freedom that they had and the lack of control that they had over their lives.

Penny Nicholls, the director for children and young people at the charity, believes that it's time for parents to accept that allowing children to take measured risks is crucial for their happiness and their future development. "I think we've seen some overzealous health and safety concerns and we've become oversensitive to the risks our children are exposed to," she says. "But we don't see a good childhood as one free of worry, failure or risk. These are part of the human lot.

"Children learn about danger through being exposed to it, but we don't allow them to make mistakes any more. I think society exaggerates the risk to children; stranger danger has not

risen over quite a considerable number of decades but people certainly feel there is a greater risk.

“It’s an adult’s responsibility to help children to negotiate the world they are living in — and if they can’t, they are suddenly launched into life at university or work without any experience of looking after themselves.”

From going to gigs to budgeting and doing DIY — what should they be allowed to do when?.

Age 11- 14

Being left alone in the house

Surprisingly, there is no minimum age for leaving a child at home on their own, but parents can be prosecuted for wilful neglect if they leave a child unsupervised “in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to health”. According to the Children’s Legal Centre, that effectively means that, if you left a ten-year-old at home for a couple of hours and something went wrong, social services would definitely become involved and you could well be prosecuted.

As the NSPCC points out, there are mature 12-year-olds who could be left alone while the parents went shopping, but immature 14-year-olds you wouldn’t trust. The charity says that it’s generally accepted that most 9 to 12-year-olds aren’t mature enough to be left but after the age of 12 most are, for up to a couple of hours — as long as they have been taught what to do in an emergency.

Doing the laundry and housework

Clare Paterson wrote the teen survival book *Grow Up!* after her ten-year-old son tried to hard-boil an egg by leaving it in a saucepan of tinned soup. She expects her children to change their own bedclothes by 10 and be able to clean the kitchen floor, loo and vacuum effectively by 11.

“It may not be fair to point it out,” says Karen Doherty, the co-author of *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting* and an ambassador for the charity UK Youth. “But it’s worth remembering that thousands of children in Britain who are carers for a sick parent are doing all these tasks and more, sometimes at the age of 7 or 8. So it can be done. But certainly by 12 these basic housework skills should have been mastered.”

Budgeting their money

In an era when children are richer (pocket money has gone up 500 per cent since 1987) and the average age to begin online shopping is 10, according to the money education charity pfege, it’s vital to teach money-management skills early.

Children should have an allowance, with a clear idea of what they’re expected to pay for, from the age of 13, says Jonathan Self, the author of *The Teenager’s Guide to Money*.

By then they can also have a pay-as-you-go cash card. Each is slightly different, but the idea is that parents load the card with the child’s allowance and they use it at ATMs or for online shopping. The child can never spend more than the amount on the card, and each time it’s used a balance is sent to his or her mobile.

Going to the cinema with a friend

By Year 9 (ages 13-14) most children should be capable of an early-evening trip into town to watch a film, says Suzanne Franks, the co-author of *Get Out of My Life*. “It sounds harsh, but things will occasionally go wrong. But if you can get through them, the child will emerge more confident,” she says.

Managing basic household tasks Clare Paterson reckons that by their 13th birthday children should be able to do basic tasks such as putting up a picture, changing a light bulb and cleaning out the U-bend (although plenty of adults would struggle with that last one).

By 16

Going to a house party

No parent could be blamed for wanting to put this one off as long as possible but, if there are adults present and limited alcohol, aged 14 is not unreasonable. (Parents of under-16s should always be present because they are liable if harm comes to the child.) It's worth remembering that 14 per cent of 12 to 13-year-olds and 33 per cent of 14 to 15-year-olds have had alcohol in the past week, rising to 62 per cent of 16 to 17-year-olds.

"In my heart of hearts I really wish that alcohol was present when they were a bit older, but you have to accept what's happening and work with it," says Doherty, who allows her 14-year-old to attend supervised house parties. "But I have carefully prepared the ground — discussing all sorts of 'what if?' scenarios and the dangers of too much alcohol. I also always know where they're going, who exactly they are with and how they are getting home."

Going to a gig

Most children will have tried this by 16; it's actually illegal for them to enter a pub without supervision before 16. Between 16 and 18 they can get in but are not allowed to buy alcohol. "My advice would be to stick to the letter of the law on this one," says Karen Sullivan, the author of *You Want to do What?*

"You can't just allow your teenager to head off without preparing the ground. "The secret is to pass on information about the dangers of smoking, overdrinking and unprotected sex slowly and surely from the age of about 13," she says. "Kids who are lectured will never respond, so it must be done in a casual way, through conversation initiated by parents when kids are feeling receptive. Parents need to understand that kids will always experiment a little bit, and research shows that those who are given respect and encouraged to be confident and self-believing are less likely to do risky things."

Going on a date

If they want to go and you feel you can trust them, any age is fine, Sullivan says. "As long as the mum and dad of both parties know where they are going and when they will be back, it's fine. If they are old enough to go to the cinema with friends, they are certainly old enough to do so with a member of the opposite sex."

On the question of sex, a lot depends on how well parents have done the groundwork in teaching children about safe sex and emotional readiness. Many parents still think that by discussing it they will encourage underage sex, but in a recent report 99 per cent of teenagers agreed that talking to their parents about sex wouldn't make them do it. And it's countries with the best — and youngest — sex education programmes, such as Holland and Denmark, that have the lowest teen pregnancy rates.

Going to a mixed sleepover

This latest trend will send a shiver down most parents' spines, with good reason.

In America, where it originates, 83 per cent of teens surveyed said that their friends were "fooling around" at mixed sex sleepovers.

Don't allow it at an age younger than 16 unless there are exceptional circumstances, and check with the hosts how much alcohol will be available and how closely they intend to supervise.

"There should, ideally, be a small number of guests and facilities for children to change/undress in private and to sleep only with members of their own sex; in other words, no dormitory set-ups and certainly no shared sleeping bags. Make sure that your child is aware that she should ring if he or she feels at all uncomfortable, compromised, frightened or unsure," Sullivan says.

By 18

Going to a music festival

Most sixth-formers are ready for this, depending on the festival (and in any case children won't be allowed in unaccompanied if they are younger than 16). But some festivals are more suitable and family-orientated than others. Your children could always road-test it at 16 or 17 by coming with you and camping in a different area.

Doing basic DIY

Research by the AA recently highlighted how fewer and fewer parents were passing on basic skills to their children — so much so that, if the trend continues, home maintenance skills could be on the road to extinction in 40 years. Tasks that your children should really be able to do by the time they go to university include: putting up a curtain rail or a shelf; using a drill; basic bicycle maintenance and stopping a water leak.

Being left in the house overnight

The NSPCC recommends that children under 16 should never be left at home alone overnight; in fact, many over-16s aren't happy spending the night alone in a house. It's worth noting that, if something happens when you leave any child under the age of 16 alone, no matter for how long, both parents can be prosecuted for wilful neglect. The NSPCC has a useful leaflet, *Home Alone*, which can be downloaded from nspcc.org.uk.

Going on holiday on their own

The average age for a first trip away from the family is 17, and most holiday companies won't accept bookings from children under 16.

Teen expert Suzie Hayman, of the Family Lives charity, advises parents to put the ball in the teenager's court. "Get them to tell you why they want to go, why it's so important to them and what they want to get out of it. What do they see as the potential risks and problems? If they mutter something about it all being fine and stop worrying, and can't give an account of themselves, then they are not ready and won't be able to manage."

Play the "what if" game to give them coping strategies: what would they do if a friend got drunk and wanted to leave the nightclub to go back to a man's hotel room? What would they do if they wanted to go off with someone; would they leave their friend in the club? You can gauge from their answers how ready they are.