



START

Decision Time

'YOU DECIDE'

Wondering how to handle face-offs and showdowns with your child? Here's a wiser approach.

BY DEAN MERRILL

A friend of mine named Rich Wilkerson, who's one of America's better youth speakers, wrote a book a few years ago with a totally illogical title. It sums up the crazy, contradictory, push-pull job of parenting: *Hold Me While You Let Me Go*.

Well, which is it?

Everyone of us knows that the task of raising kids entails *controlling* them, keeping the lid on, preventing harm, restraining goofiness, running the show, calling the shots. If we leave children unsupervised, they'll kill themselves within 20 minutes, we think.

That's the *Hold Me* part.

On the other hand, we don't want to do this forever; we want to launch our offspring, over an 18-year period, into responsible independence. We want to get them to the point where they are *self-controlled*, able to run their own show.

That's the *While You Let Me Go* part.

The trick, of course, is to stay current with the adjustments along the way. You've kept a firm hand with your kindergartner—but now, what is a first-grader capable of doing alone? How about a fifth-grader? What can you expect of a teenager? Each child is a moving project, learning new skills on almost a weekly basis, becoming just a little more competent with every turn of the calendar page. We parents have to keep up or risk a battle every time we say, "No, you're not ready for that yet."

Two Ph.D.s in the area of child development, Gerald D. Alpern of Indiana University and Thomas J. Boll of the University of Virginia, have published a set of benchmarks for kids, a definition of "normal," if you will. Toddlers age 2 1/2 to 3 ought to be able to work a pair of scissors, for example. A 5-year-old should be able to open the refrigerator and come up with an acceptable sandwich. An 8-year-old

should have figured out that Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny aren't real. A 12-year-old should be able to read and understand a *front-page* newspaper story (not just the sports or fashion section). Drs. Alpern and Boll's standards go on for pages and pages.

As I read their work, the thought came to me that in the area of granting permission, most parents *assume a little less maturity than is in fact the case*. In other words, the child is slightly ahead of what we think is "safe." (We like to worry!) And even if we force ourselves to catch up to reality, the son or daughter keeps growing and stretching, so that three months down the road we're behind the curve again.

I shall never forget the Thanksgiving Day when, at a family gathering, our innocent seventh-grade son, Nathan, was introduced by an older cousin to contemporary Christian music. Suddenly—overnight!—Nathan wasn't satisfied with the children's tunes he'd grown up with and even performed in church. Things had to be louder, more rhythmic, more intense. My wife and I were irked. How dare this outsider pollute our home and drag our son away from the "cultured" musical taste we had carefully instilled! (Nathan's cousin is now an upstanding seminary graduate and associate pastor, by the way.)

It took a week of teeth-grinding and late-night debate before we finally admitted that our son was once again growing up. He'd stumbled into one of the Big Four Issues that almost all teenagers use to express their individuality and rattle their parents' cages: Music, Clothing, Hair and Jargon. (Any one of those is good for a rousing argument almost every day of the week, you've probably noticed.) We reluctantly decided to judge Nathan's songs by their lyrics rather than their strangeness, and as the teenage years went along, music turned out to be a blessing in our home rather than a curse.

Kids *are* going to grow up on us, like it or not. In fact, they'd *better!* We certainly don't want them frozen in time. And one of the best ways to let them know that we understand this is to find safe settings in which to use the Two Magic Words of Parenting:

"You decide."

In other words, *Guess what—I'm not going to dictate the outcome this time. I think you can handle this one. You weigh the pros and cons, the dangers and opportunities, and then YOU make the decision.*

Wow! What a surprise. Dad isn't a total dictator after all, is he? Amazing.

Lose a Turn

Not everything is a safe setting, of course. Not every decision can be handed over to a young person. You would never say "You decide" about whether to drop out of school, for example, or whether to drink.

But in hundreds of other matters, where in fact you can live with either option, parents can avoid tumultuous battles and teach responsibility for the future by handing over the power of choice. Granted, your adult wisdom says one option is better than the other, but neither one is disastrous. So why not let the child learn something along the way?

I remember the Thursday evening I arrived

I was hardly in the mood to play Solomon. I brushed them off with an "I dunno. We'll talk in the morning."

Of course I could bring down the hammer and deny the Friday night event so as to safeguard Saturday's performance—and take the heat that would surely erupt. But wait a minute. . . . Could the girls in fact comprehend the issue here? I elected to give it a try.

"Okay," I announced the next morning at breakfast, "you can go to the party tonight. I'll even drive you and pick you up. But you might want to think about how hard you've worked the past three months getting ready for this competition. Do you want to jeopardize it? How late would you choose to stay?"

"How late *can* we stay?" Rhonda asked, putting the onus back on me.

"You tell me,"

I replied, refusing to take her bait. "If you were on your own, and I were out of the picture, when would you leave the party in order not to be dog-tired for Saturday?"

They looked at each other. One girl said 9:30. The other said 10. Suddenly this wasn't a case of what Dad would allow, but rather what was in their own self-interest. Hmmm . . . then came the most amazing lines of all:

"I don't think I want to go to the party."
"I don't either."

Problem solved—and no fight!

The trendy adult word for this is *empowerment*—giving the steering wheel temporarily to the weaker, younger, less experienced person so he or she can get a feel for making choices and see what causes what.

If a child doesn't get to make independent decisions until he leaves home, the result is not likely to be good. Far better for him or her to hear the words "You decide" from a loving and wise parent all along the way. •

Dean Merrill recently left Focus on the Family to start an editorial consulting firm called Colorado Wordmaster, based in Colorado Springs.

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What's Safe?

Young people of every age can grow through hearing "You decide." Examples:

Preschool Years

- which of two (preselected) shirts to wear
- which stuffed animal to take to bed
- which breakfast cereal to eat

Elementary Grades

- which game to play with a friend or parent
- whom to invite to a birthday party
- which musical instrument to study

Middle School Years

- which sport (if any) to pursue
- how to decorate their bedrooms
- which Christian music to listen to

High School Years

- what electives to take in school
- what summer job to seek
- what ministry options to pursue through church or youth group.

home from a business trip, only to find our ninth-grade twin daughters fervently lobbying their mother for permission to go to a birthday party the next evening that would run till midnight. While the party would be properly supervised, the problem lay with what followed immediately afterward on Saturday: an all-day music competition, with a crack-of-dawn departure.

"Can we go? Can we go?" they pleaded. "We'll be fine on Saturday; don't worry about it."

Go Back to Start

My wife gave me a look that said, *Your turn, big fella. Glad you're home to handle this.*

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FINISH

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