

# independence day

The older your kids get, the more freedom they want. Here's how to give it to them without worry

by Karen Leland



**Y**OUR 15-YEAR-OLD wants to go out with a boy she likes, your 12-year-old is lobbying for a cell phone, and your 10-year-old constantly tells you he's too old for a babysitter. When it comes to independence, kids will push the limits of liberty—and your parental buttons. The trick is knowing when they're ready for more autonomy, figuring out how much to give them, and doing it all without feeling uneasy.

## hanging out

"You don't really see two 16-year-olds going out for dinner and a movie anymore," says Kele Gasparini, a mom of four in Novato, California. "These days, they travel in herds, and it's not called

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CONTINUED dating, it's called hanging out." She should know: Her youngest child is 13 and her oldest is 23.

While the definition of dating may have changed somewhat, the parental concerns that come with it haven't. That's why you have to gauge kids' readiness not just by age, but by their day-to-day behavior, too.

Observing how they handle everyday life is one way to determine their level of responsibility, says Betsy Brown Braun, child development and behavior specialist and author of *Just Tell Me What to Say*. For instance, if your child says she's going to be in a certain place at a certain time, is she? If you tell her to call you if she's going to a friend's house after school, does she? "If your child follows through in such areas, it's a pretty safe bet that he or she is able to make good judgment calls and is likely to be responsible," says Braun. However, if your child falls short in these areas and others—constantly forgetting to do things, procrastinating, not keeping promises—odds are she's not quite ready.

When it comes to age, Braun offers this general rule of thumb: 12- or 13-year-olds can go out with a group of friends during the day, but evening meet-ups, say, at the movies or a party, are more suited to 15- or 16-year-olds.

Once you've decided to give your kids more social freedom, do it in a way that works for you and them. Try to avoid leading questions like, "You're not going to the movies so that you can sit in the back and make out, are you?" cautions Devra Renner, coauthor of *Mommy Guilt*. You'll just put your kids on the defensive. Instead, ask open-ended questions: "Where are you planning to go?" "Who else will be there?" "How do you know them?"

Aviva Pflock, a mother of three and one of Renner's coauthors, asks her two teen girls these questions all the time, but not as an interrogation. She waits until they're in the car together and approaches it as a normal, everyday conversation. "Sometimes kids are more comfortable talking side by side while you're driving them someplace, rather than face to face," she says.

## home alone

The movie may have been funny, but the real-life version is no laughing matter for parents. How to tell if your child has the maturity and dependability to be left home solo? Start by discussing different scenarios with him, suggests Pflock, who's done it with her two girls. Ask what he would do if the UPS man came to the door while he was home alone. What if the phone rang and someone asked to speak to a parent? "I'm not looking for a specific answer when I ask these questions," says Pflock. "I'm looking for the logical thinking process behind the answer." Once you start a dialogue, she adds, talk with your kids about their answers and help them think through better alternatives.

Another tool you can use: Pay attention to how your child takes care of things around the house, says Braun. If he spills something, does he clean it up? If the teapot on the stove starts to whistle, does he turn it off or go get you? Such little things reveal a lot about a child's level of responsibility. "It's a good indication of when kids are prepared to be home on their own," says Braun.

If your child shows the right signs of maturity, the next step is to gauge his comfort level and build it up over time. Just because he's begging

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## INDEPENDENCE DAY

CONTINUED you to stop calling the babysitter, it doesn't mean he's truly secure enough to be in the house by himself. Braun suggests this "drip method" of independence:

Begin by leaving your child (ideally, age 11 or 12) home alone for an hour during the day, with specific details: *I'm going to the store on Fifth Street. I'll be back in an hour. All the doors are locked, and you have my cell phone number if you need to call me.*

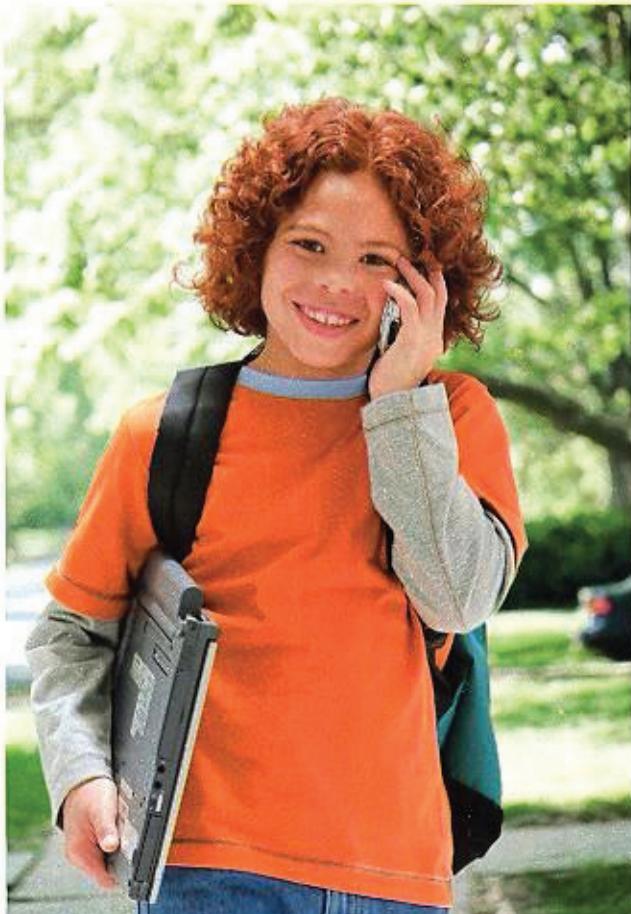
Once he's comfortable with short spurts of your absence during the day, go out for a little bit longer. Take a walk with a friend or do an afternoon's worth of errands.

By the age of 13, your kids should be sufficiently prepped to stay home alone during the evening. Braun suggests going out to dinner or a movie to start, something with a short, specific period of time. If all goes well, eventually you can leave them alone for longer periods during the night while you attend a party or other function, depending on their maturity.

## owning a phone

It seems that every elementary school kid has a cell phone these days. And while they're a great way to stay accessible to your children, do 10- and 11-year-olds (or younger!) really need them?

That's likely a debate that's been raised in your house more than once. If your preteen is begging for a cell phone and you're on the fence, ask yourself if he consistently behaves responsibly, suggests Braun. Does he do his chores without prodding? Complete his homework? Obey your rules? Take care of his stuff and not lose things? If he does this most of the time, he can probably be counted on to handle a phone.



But that doesn't mean simply handing one over. "Even good kids need to be monitored and restricted when it comes to technology," says Norman E. Hoffman, PhD, author of *Bad Children Can Happen to Good Parents*, who strongly advises adding cell phone controls.

Five of the most important: Restrict the time of day the phone is in operation, such as no calls during school hours. Restrict specific phone numbers that can be dialed in or out. Limit the number of minutes per month. Require your child to pay at least part of his cell phone bill with his allowance. Take advantage of the GPS option so you can go online to check where your kids are at any given time.

Also, don't rely on your child's cell as your only means of contact when he's not home. "Many parents call their kids exclusively on their cell phones to check in," he says. "That's not enough." Make sure you have the home number of whatever friend your child is visiting. **wd**

## HOW NOT TO CAVE

If you're finding it hard to hold your ground, here's how to say no and mean it.

### remain calm

"Don't get roped into the emotion of the moment," says *Mommy Guilt* coauthor Devra Renner. Kids can be dramatic, and if you react, things can quickly devolve into a yell-fest.

### be consistent

If you tell your child she can't go to an unsupervised party, don't make an exception because she says it's her best friend's birthday. You have to be confident in what you're saying, even with small things, or you'll send your kids mixed messages.

### show caring

"Avoid saying no right away," advises Renner. If it's not an urgent matter, you have time for fact-finding and discussion. Tell your child that you want to think about what she's asking and do some research. If you do come back with a no, acknowledge your child's feelings by saying, "I know all your friends are doing it, and you're angry at me for saying no, but Dad and I have discussed it and we've decided that it's not appropriate."