

Adjusting the Apron Strings

By Marvin W Berkowitz, PhD

One of the great challenges of parenting is how to balance freedom and control. There are lots of metaphors for this one. Letting out some rope. Tied to one's apron strings. Cutting the umbilical cord. And so on.

It is not easy to measure. When parents ask me how much freedom to give their child, I try to find a bunker before answering. Or instead of answering. It is a tough one.

I tend to think of it as part of the art of parenting.

It is really an act of balancing. The other day at the student union at my university, we were informally entertained by a juggler. He was just practicing, but he was very good. It really is a skill and an art to do what he does.

And parenting is similar. Part of it is practice, skill, and technique. Practicing and knowing how. Thinking and planning.

But it is not as much fun to watch a purely technical juggler. It is more fun to watch a juggler who is practiced and technically adept but who also is an artist.

And being a good parent is similar. Some people just seem to have a natural flair for juggling all the tasks and issues and pressures of being a parent (while still having a second job as a human being).

Others really don't get it.

And I don't know how to teach the art part.

But that still doesn't get us off the hook of having to figure out how much freedom or control is too much or too little. One general rule however is that as kids get older, you should let out more and more rope. How much is the art part. But just doing it is good parenting.

I remember when my son was a toddler and then a preschooler that he would lobby for more and more freedom concerning how far he could ride his Big Wheels motorcycle or his tricycle.

There were no driveways on our street (all garages were in the back alley) so he was safe riding up and down the sidewalk. But there was a point where we couldn't see him anymore as he went down the block.

So we would set limits. "Only as far as the Mueller's yard." "Only as far as the big crack in the sidewalk." "Only as far as the fire hydrant."

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Then eventually we let him out of our sight. For him (he was about 4 or 5 by then) it was a major new step. A new horizon. A sign of growing up. When we let him ride all the way down the block to his kindergarten buddy Nasser's house, a new world opened up for him.

Now he is riding around again, except this time with a learner's permit and my car. But the issues are the same; how much freedom is too much? When are we being overprotective or unreasonable? When is he being too imprudent? At what point in this continuum does the real danger lie? Whether it be him getting lost or hurt on his Big Wheels or getting in an accident in my Land Rover.

So we need to think hard about juggling the balls of freedom and control. We need to think about what is really safe and what is not, but also what will breed the healthy form of independence that all our kids need to have to make it in the world.

And we need to understand that there is an art to this parenting thing and not all questions have ready made answers. I know this is less than satisfying guidance, but your kids didn't come with a manual or a warrantee, did they?

Character is formed not only in the mechanical and obvious choices of parenting, but also in the murky crevices of the art of parenting for character.