

Free-Range Parenting: Balancing Protection with the Dignity of Risk

by Anna Stewart, Family Advocate



What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “free-range” parenting? Many people picture extremely lenient parents who impose few rules and fewer consequences. However, as with many stereotypes, that’s far from the truth.

Free-ranging parenting, like all parenting, takes a lot of hard work—and for the kids, being free-range is a hard-earned privilege. As a mother of teens, I expect them to make their own choices and be responsible for those choices. But, before I ever allowed them to walk alone to a friend’s house, or talk to their teacher when their math grade slid, I spent hours teaching my children the skills they needed to independently tackle such challenges.

Rather than being “spoiled” (as many might imagine), a successful free-range child is one who knows how to problem-solve, ask for help, assess risks and benefits, and be flexible. They’ve learned from experience that they are capable and can rely on themselves. And while they may know firsthand the sometimes high cost of making mistakes, they’ve also learned how to take responsibility for their actions.

Life experiences come with risk. As parents, our job is to prepare our children to make their own choices and support them in experiencing both success and failure.

Free-range parenting can be harder for us as parents than it is for our children. Talia, a mom in one of my parent groups, has an 11-year-old son, Jake, a brilliant but controlling boy. She came to our group frustrated and worried that her son would need her to manage his life forever. He pushed away peers and didn’t have any friends. His teacher spent a lot of time redirecting him and prompting him to finish his work. Talia’s heart ached for Jake: life seemed so hard for him.

Out of love, she kept him close. She arranged her schedule to be there after school and set up activities for them to do together. Talia wanted to protect him from any more suffering or pain. When Jake asked for more autonomy, Talia dug in; she was sure she knew what was best for him and just how he should do things. She couldn't see that she was the one who needed to change.

Our parenting instinct is to protect our children. And protecting them in their early years is critical and natural. As they grow, we gradually give them some control, like letting them choose what to wear and what to eat. But when our kids struggle, instinct kicks backs in. When our kids are bullied or have difficulty learning, we often tighten our management of them out of a desire to protect them from more failures and more harm. But what if our instinct is potentially harming them?

I asked Talia to tell us one chore she'd like to see Jake learn to do. I asked if she could let him do it his way and not fix it, judge it, or belittle it. I asked if she could give her son the dignity of risk.

What does that mean, **dignity of risk**? Life experiences come with risk. As parents, our job is to prepare our children to make their own choices and support them in experiencing both success and failure. By protecting our children from life's inevitable setbacks, we reduce their opportunities to learn things for themselves; by sheltering them from failure, we also get in the way of their chance to succeed. If we want our children to become thoughtful, independent, flexible, self-aware adults, we have to be willing to let them make mistakes and take a fall sometimes. When we protect them, we are teaching them that they are not capable of making and dealing with their own decisions.

Talia slowly changed her habits and gave Jake the chance to both make mistakes and to succeed through his own efforts. This was one of those times when it was about the parent changing in order to give her child the experiences that belong to him.

So how do we go from vigilantly protecting our children to giving them opportunities to experience the dignity of risk? **Use the Three-T's: Teach, Think and Time.**

1. **Teach problem solving.** Come up with some "low-risk/high return" things you want your child to learn, like making cookies, cleaning the bathroom, or making their bed. (Avoid high-stakes situations at first, such

as things that are school-based, as they likely involve other people who may not be ready to give your child a chance to try and to fail.) Give your child the choice of which task they'd like to learn first. Also give them a choice about when to start (now, tomorrow, or on a defined date).

When you are both calm and have time, teach the skill. Be prepared for resistance. If your child has internalized a feeling of not being capable, they may be reluctant to try. And their resistance may be loud and clear, leaving you to wonder if the attempt is even worth it. *Don't give up!* Try bringing some novelty to the situation, like making a video of you practicing the skill together. Novelty opens our brains to new ideas. Some parents find it easier for everyone if they are not in the room when their child is trying out a new skill.

Kids won't do a perfect job at first. *Resist the urge to fix or criticize.* Praise their efforts and intentions. Remember, this is also about dignity. Slowly, begin giving your child the chance to come up with their own options and ideas and gradually begin increasing the stakes (aka, the risks).

2. **Think ahead.** If you are struggling with finding the balance of protection and risk, it can help to think through likely scenarios, both in the near and more distance future, where there is an element of risk involved such as riding their bike to the store, taking the bus alone, or learning to drive. Remember, risk is essential to learning and is a part of life for everyone.

Think about the healthy risks you took when you were young and how you learned and grew through experiencing those risks. Your children need that too. Controlling too much removes the opportunity to experience and solve problems. Our kids need to know how to handle life's situations when we aren't there. They need to get cold when they decide not to bring their coat, or to ask someone out and get turned down, or to misjudge the time and miss the bus.

3. **Take time.** There may be times when you wonder if *you* can deal with the risks. Ask yourself, is this your edge or your child's? Who is taking the bigger risk emotionally? What can you do to take care of yourself? How are you going to respond when they do make a mistake, or refuse help, or just really want to try it themselves? Give yourself time to be clear about these issues.



My son is about to graduate from high school; he felt prepared to fill out and send in college applications, decide upon his yearbook picture and quote (I will find out what he sent when the yearbook comes out), deal with ordering the cap and gown, and choosing new shoes to wear to the prom. I don't always agree with his timing, his choices or his decisions, but he feels capable of making them—and understands that he will also deal with the consequences. When he walks across the stage next month, he will know that his graduation belongs to him: it was through his hard work, his mistakes (like flunking pre-calculus and having to repeat the whole year), and his choices that he is heading off to college. I trust that he will continue to learn through the dignity of risk.

About Anna Stewart, Family Advocate

Anna Stewart is a family advocate, writer, speaker, facilitator and single mother of 3 unique kids. She is passionate about helping families learn to advocate WITH their children and teens and supporting those with AD/HD. Anna is the author of *School Support for Students with AD/HD*. Visit her website and Facebook page [here](#).

