

# OFF THEY GO



## Eight Things You Cannot Do for Your Children



I have worked for a decade as the consultant to a canoe tripping camp in northern Ontario. After the youngest campers, the eleven-year-old boys and girls, complete their first five-day canoe trip away from the main camp, they return to home base. The community holds a campfire in the evening where each child gets to tell his or her story about the journey. Because most of the older campers and their staff are “out on trip,” there isn’t a huge audience to listen to the youngsters’ adventures. Nevertheless, after supper everyone walks out of the dining hall—there are no electric lights indoors—and gathers in a circle by the lakeshore. It is still daylight at seven o’clock in the evening and the water twinkles in the summer sun. Behind the assembled crowd are the simple wood cabins. To the right and to the left are the skinned log frames that cradle the canoes upside-down when



they are out of the water, their green canvas bottoms facing up. It is a simple setting: the lake, the sun, the cabins, the canoes, and this small gathering of people, not much more.

Tradition requires that each staff person describes the journey his or her section has completed, where they went, on which lakes they paddled, and the distance of the portages they completed. Standing next to the head counselor is the guide, who is typically a few years younger, perhaps nineteen instead of twenty-three, and then ten campers in a ragged line. Some of the children are delighted to be in front of an audience; others are shy and uncomfortable. The counselors are dressed in the most beat-up outfits imaginable: ragged jeans and T-shirts are featured. Wearing new outdoor gear is not valued at this camp. A few are wearing checkered flannel shirts, which signal that they have been at the camp for ten years. Every head counselor introduces each camper by name and says something personal about that child, often a wry comment about a personality trait or a klutzy start that ended in a moment of mastery. Finally, each child gets to tell his or her own story.

Without fail, both boys and girls talk about all the worst stuff that happened to them. A boy will say, “We paddled in the rain for four hours and when we got to the campsite, we couldn’t light a fire because the wood was so wet. We had to have a cold dinner.”

One eleven-year-old girl described hiking along a portage with a pack bigger than anything she had ever carried in her life. She stepped into a sphagnum moss bog and as she struggled to get free, she got slowly sucked in until she was stuck in mud up to her waist. Her friends had to pull her out, muddy and wet. A second friend had to fish in the bog to recover her shoe.

A boy described being out on the lake when a thunderstorm broke out. They had to paddle frantically to get to shore, away from the threat of lightning. His group tried to tie a tarpaulin to four trees to shelter them but the wind was so strong that the

tarp kept blowing away. In any case, the rain had been almost horizontal at that point and there was no way to stay dry. They slept in semiwet sleeping bags that night.

Another boy spoke about the hundreds of mosquitoes that surrounded his face and attacked his bare arms and legs on a swampy trail. He was wearing shorts at the campfire that evening and we could see the multitude of red bumps up and down his legs. (The parent in me wanted to shout, *Put on pants! It's dusk—don't you know that's when the mosquitoes come out?*)

Summer after summer, as I have listened to these campfire horror stories, I've been struck not by the particular discomforts recounted, but by how proud and happy these children seemed. They had just completed one of the scariest and most uncomfortable five-day trips of their lives, yet they looked triumphant, with big smiles, upright posture, and—from the boys—a bit of arm-pumping and self-congratulation. But this wasn't superficial bravado. They didn't hide their fears from the audience. They talked honestly about having been scared, having felt overwhelmed, and especially not being sure that they could do it. The girls often adopted a tone of: "I know this doesn't sound like a girl thing, but . . ." or "I never imagined myself in this predicament, but . . ." You could see their identities changing and their definition of what it meant to be young women expanding in the moment.

I am always very proud of these children. It is impossible not to be. And as I've listened, I've had two strong and contradictory thoughts: *I wish their parents could see them now*, so they could see the remarkable growth in these children in just five days, and, *I'm so glad that their parents aren't here*. Because I believe that the developmental leaps these children have achieved in a week would not have taken place if their parents had been present.

Wonderful things can happen for children when they are away from their parents. I am deeply convinced that the presence of Mom and Dad does not always add value to a child's every experience. This remains true, in spite of the fact that this generation of parents, especially college-educated mothers, are spending more hours with their children than ever before.

For years I have been asking audiences of parents a deceptively simple question: "What was *the* sweetest moment of your childhood?" (Before you read on, take ten seconds and answer this for yourself. Don't dissect the question; just let your mind wander; a scene will come to mind.) I wait some moments so that audience members can come up with a memory, then I ask, "Please raise your hands if your parents were present when that sweetest memory took place." I have done this with thousands of people and the result never varies much. Around 20 percent of adults say that their parents were part of their sweetest memories; approximately 80 percent say that their parents weren't there. When audience members turn in their chairs to see the result, they laugh self-consciously. As parents we're hoping that what we're doing is laying a foundation of happy memories for our children. When we are confronted with the fact that our own best memories of childhood took place away from our parents, we are a bit confused. That's a slap in the face to dedicated parents. Or is it?

When I ask individuals who said their parents were present to speak about their happiest memories, they cite the moments that most parents work pretty hard to create: opening presents on Christmas morning, cooking Thanksgiving dinner surrounded by relatives, being together at the beach in the summer, having Mom or Dad read a favorite book at bedtime, playing cards or Monopoly, a family road trip.

When I ask for the sweetest moments without parents, 80 percent of adults tell variations on a similar story that always

have the same four or five elements: The child is away from adult supervision, out-of-doors, with friends, facing a challenge and doing something a bit risky. Many people remember being out in the woods, building a tree house with buddies from the neighborhood. Others recall standing knee-deep in a stream following a big rainstorm, building a rock dam with friends. A woman remembered walking eight miles with her friends through an unknown town and along an unknown road after the mother of one of the girls failed to pick them up.

A Canadian colleague of mine remembers that, at twelve, he and his friends used to walk two hours from home to play at the construction site for the brand-new campus of Simon Fraser University. They roamed for hours in the dangerous construction site, playing hide-and-seek and various chase games on unfinished multistory buildings. Years later, as a young man in his twenties, he attended Simon Fraser as an undergraduate. He recalled looking out the window of the library and seeing a ledge along which he had walked when he was a boy when it had been a newly poured concrete wall, four stories aboveground. The sight and the memory scared him. What he had done was dangerous. Now the head of an international school in Africa, it was clear how proud he was of his boyhood accomplishments, even his risk taking, and how sad he felt that the children in his school no longer have the freedom to play the way he and his friends did.

One Indian woman volunteered that the sweetest moment of her childhood was when her parents allowed her to take a plane alone from India to the United States and change planes at Frankfurt Airport on her own. This was back in the day before airlines began requiring minors to be accompanied. She was nine years old.

The trust and confidence of her parents meant everything to her; she was giddy with the feelings of independence. When I

asked her whether she had ever allowed her children to do the equivalent, she said yes. She and her husband had allowed their son to make the reverse of her childhood journey on his own, from America to India . . . at age twelve.

When I pointed out that she had waited three years longer to trust her child than her parents had, she acknowledged my point, but stated that we live in a scarier world. We can argue about whether this is true. Rates of violent crime are at historic lows in the United States. However, with the Internet, continuous online and broadcast news, and social media chatter, bad news travels fast and far, fueling parents' sense of constant catastrophic possibility. Naturally, parents feel they must protect their children more than they themselves were protected. That is the tension at the heart of this book: When and how do we learn to let go? And why is it so important that we do?

I believe that at many points in their children's lives, parents need to step aside, ask other adults to take over and even send their children away in order to help their offspring become loving, productive, moral, and independent young adults. For me, these four adjectives capture the central, universal goals of parenting. You want to raise a child who can both find love in this world and show love to others; you want a child who will make a contribution to society and who won't break laws or exploit others sexually or financially; and you need them to be someone who can live without you and not be a dependent burden on others. That's a reasonable description of what it means to be a responsible adult.

I believe that childhood requires an endpoint—children need to turn into adults—and parents need to have some images of adulthood in mind. My friend Bill Polk says that a parent's job is to raise children “who can leave you.” The problem with that simple definition, of course, is the leaving part. When is the right moment to let go, or even push your child out of the nest? How

does a child learn to leave? There are actually many moments of letting go, from the time you release the hand of your toddler so that she can take a few steps on her own, to the day you wave good-bye to your son or daughter moving away to college or a life on their own.

In my work as a clinical psychologist and so-called “parenting expert,” I have spoken with many parents who, out of the deepest love for their children, want only to do more—not less—for their children. They believe that the more time, energy, attention, and money they can devote to their child, the better. Indeed, if you were to boil down the thousands of parenting questions I am asked in a given year, their essence basically is: *What should I be doing for my child?* The question has infinite variations: “How can I help my child’s self-confidence?” “How can I help my child make more friends?” “My daughter is a perfectionist. How can I help her to not be so hard on herself?” “How can I help my eight- and ten-year-old sons to stop fighting?” “How can I help my child do better in school?” “How can I motivate my tenth-grade son to get better grades?”

These can be tough questions to answer, because quite often the parent is not doing too little but is already doing too much. For example, moms who are spending an enormous amount of time trying to adjudicate their sons’ disputes should probably just leave the room when they start fighting. Let them learn not to start something they cannot resolve. Parents who are trying to persuade an anxious and perfectionist daughter that things are going to be okay in life should not stay up until 1 a.m. keeping her company while she does her homework. Though some of these cases seem obvious to me, it feels harsh to scold caring parents by saying, “Don’t do so much for your kids!”

I have tinkered with ways to make parents laugh at their tendency to overparent. I tease them. At parenting talks, I bend at the waist and rush frantically about the stage snatching invis-

ible items off the floor, doing an impression of a mother picking up her children's clothes, all the while complaining, "My children are so sloppy and irresponsible. I don't know why they never pick anything up." The audience laughs because they recognize immediately why the children don't pick up their clothes. Mom always will. The only price her children have to pay for letting their mother do all the cleaning is her anger, which is very familiar and not all that scary.

Parents ask me questions about more subtle problems: how they can help their child get over fears, or learn to take risks, or become more responsible. It often seems to me that no matter how loving the parents, they are not going to be able to help their child through this challenge. It is going to take someone else. Perhaps the child's friends will give him the courage to overcome fears or take risks. Or perhaps it will be an aunt or an uncle, a family friend, or a camp counselor who does that. Here's a paradox: a nineteen-year-old camp counselor—a stranger—is often better at getting children to pick up their clothes from the floor than a thirty-nine-year-old parent.

There are many times when my answer to a parenting question has been: Have you thought about sending your child to sleepaway camp? Have you considered that your child needs to be *away from you* to take this particular developmental leap? I ask because, in the final analysis, there are things we cannot do for our children, no matter how much we might want to. In order to successfully accomplish these tasks, to grow in the ways they need to grow, children have to do it on their own, and usually away from their parents, sometimes overnight, sometimes for days or weeks or even months.

In my conversations with parents, they are often surprised and relieved to learn that, developmentally speaking, there is a limit to what they can and should do for their children. More specifically, there are eight fundamental things that parents want to do for or give their children, but cannot:

1. We cannot make our children happy.
2. We cannot give our children high self-esteem.
3. We cannot make friends for our children or micro-manage their friendships.
4. We cannot successfully double as our child's agent, manager, and coach.
5. We cannot create the "second family" for which our child yearns in order to facilitate his or her own growth.
6. It is increasingly apparent that we parents cannot compete with or limit our children's total immersion in the online, digital, and social media realms.
7. We cannot keep our children perfectly safe, but we can drive them crazy trying.
8. We cannot make our children independent.

I understand from my conversations with parents over the years that they *wish* they could do all of these things. But let's take a closer look. I hope you will come to appreciate why, as parents, we cannot accomplish what are essentially our children's developmental tasks.

*1. We cannot make our children happy*

If there is one single sentence that parents say to me more than any other it is this: "I just want her [or him] to be happy." Moms and dads say this to convey a number of different thoughts. One is a disclaimer of parental ambition; they are saying that they don't have a specific goal in mind for their child. They don't need her to be a doctor or go to Harvard, they just want her "to be happy." The second is that they understand the bottom line in life is emotional, and while they do have specific goals for their child, they are going to love their child even if she fails to achieve those goals (play the violin, be a good athlete). The par-

ents are going to be satisfied with happiness. The third idea is that parenting is confusing and overwhelming and it is really hard to anticipate the future for your child, but happiness seems like the catchall thing to wish for. Finally, parents are often saying, “I find it extremely difficult to bear my child’s unhappiness. I am so empathically tuned in to her that my emotional state is linked to hers.” This is captured in the parenting wisdom that so many mothers have shared with me: “A mother is only ever as happy as her least happy child.”

What almost no parents ever say to me is the simple truth that I have tried to capture with the title of this book, namely: *My child is often happiest when he or she is away from home.* Although it can be tough for any individual child to be away from his or her parents, the vast majority of children often feel quite relieved and happy when they are away from home. Let’s be honest: At different times in our childhood we felt happier away from home than we were in our house. Home was safe and familiar, but it was also filled with expectations and anxiety and the endless need on our parents’ parts to protect and shape us . . . because they are parents.

Human beings are biologically programmed to protect and feed their young. We are not alone in that. The ability to care for our children is signature mammalian behavior, one of the things that make us the creatures that we are. Like other mammals, we keep our offspring with us until they are truly ready to go off on their own. What is uniquely human is that our children are so dependent for so long—longer than any other animal—and that we tend our children’s emotional lives.

Parents and children have a sophisticated system of signaling one another when there are threats. When our children cry, we come running to find out if they are in danger; when their faces look sad, we wrap our arms around them to comfort them. We are equipped with neurons in our brains that mirror the emo-

tional activity in their brains. We empathize with what they are feeling and we respond appropriately, and protectively. They possess the same “mirror neurons” that enable them to tune in to us and, ultimately, their friends’ and later their own children’s emotional lives. The empathic connection between parent and child is a fundamental part of our nature, instinctive and unquestioned.

But that’s where things get complicated. It has been said that the single most important fact about the psychology of human beings is a period of prolonged dependence on parents, which typically spans at least eighteen and perhaps as long as twenty-five years. In the past two hundred years advances in medicine and certain cultural trends have dramatically expanded our capacity to protect our children’s health and provide material comforts and enrichment opportunities far beyond the expectations of earlier generations. But how long, and to what extent, are we responsible for their emotional well-being? Does protecting a child mean protecting his or her feelings from threat or discomfort at every moment? I certainly understand the wish. I hate to see my children unhappy, but I sometimes feel that middle-class and upper-middle-class parents—myself included—have more child-protection equipment available to them than they need, from oversupervision to ferocious advocacy.

Our hope is that we can protect our children from all bad feelings. But I don’t think this is wise from a philosophical perspective, since struggle and suffering are part of life. I also fail to see the wisdom from a child development perspective; children need to learn to manage their own feelings. Sometimes they have to get away from us and experience a little suffering in life, along with the full range of feelings in life—boredom, anger, giddiness, romance, et cetera—to get the hang of it on their own. As long as a parent is standing by watching, the child is going to interpret his or her experiences through the parents’ reactions.

As a child, you don't know exactly what you truly feel unless you are away from your parents. Maybe your mother is standing by you saying, "Oh, I am so happy that you got the sixth-grade good citizenship award," but it didn't feel like a big deal to you and her reaction is confusing. Perhaps you are not as unhappy as your father is about your lack of playing time in Pop Warner football. Maybe you were okay with sitting on the bench. Can you tell him that? Probably not. You have to filter your feelings through the lens of his feelings. That's why children need to get away from their parents to discover what truly makes them happy. Children who go away to camp often report that only at camp can they "be themselves." As one eleven-year-old boy said: "Sometimes at home I feel pressured, but at camp I don't feel that people are judging me."

Away from home, children know what they hate and what they love, what makes them miserable and what makes them happy, because they are having the experience on their own. You don't have to share your camp feelings except by letter. No one else is interpreting the experience for you.

## *2. We cannot give our children high self-esteem*

We not only want our children to be happy, we want them to have a consistently high level of self-esteem. I sometimes tease parents about determined efforts to boost their child's self-esteem. I remind them that children can never feel consistently self-confident because: 1. they are generally much shorter than everyone; 2. they have no money of their own; 3. they lack important skills; 4. people boss them around; 5. they have no car keys; and 6. they cannot escape. Moms and dads laugh at this reminder because, of course, it is all true. If you and I suffered from all of the above-mentioned deficiencies we would feel terrible. Teasing aside, it is also true that at times children do suffer emotionally, just from being children. They are overwhelmed by

their sense of inadequacy and frustration. They are too small and too immature to achieve what they want to achieve. That's true of adults as well, but grown-ups are more accustomed to the reality that we cannot bend the world to our will and opinion. Children are still hoping that the world can be made perfect, so they protest and complain. Some feel like failures about what they cannot do and what they cannot change and may suffer from, what parents may perceive as "low self-esteem." Some may grow depressed.

I have seen frustrated children hit themselves in the head and even bang their head against the wall. Kids sometimes break things, insult people, and proclaim that they hate themselves. A friend of mine recently reported that her bright and conscientious daughter comes home miserable from high school every day complaining that it is "boring." Another friend is troubled by her third-grade son's fear of his teacher, a legendary tyrant at his school. Another is worried that her daughter's failure to make a competitive dance team will scar her for life. It is hard for these parents to watch their beloved children grapple with demoralizing school situations, especially when they see their children's bright potential. We all wish to save our children from feeling frustrated or inadequate; unfortunately, we just cannot manage it. Even if the high school did offer the bored student more challenging courses, or the fearful boy a different teacher, or if the aspiring dancer made the cut, the children might (like most of their peers) face problems with teachers whose personalities they didn't like, tensions with friends, or other disappointments in school or life. We need to remember that the journey through school—through life itself—is always stressful and that there are things in our children's lives we cannot fix. Nor should we necessarily rush to try. Some experience of failure and frustration is an essential part of a child's emotional education.

In my book *The Pressured Child*, I shadowed several high

school students whose significantly different abilities, challenges, and personalities might lead one to believe that they would suffer from problems in self-confidence. Not surprisingly, each child's fuller story showed the much more complex and often counterintuitive story of development—and self-esteem. Grades aside, because they often obscure more than they illuminate about a child's inner life, it is a child's experience of connection, recognition, and power that deeply shapes self-esteem. A parent who tries to orchestrate those things only confirms a doubtful child's sense of incompetence, and only becomes an obstacle to the child's genuine accomplishment.

The myth of the happy childhood and the goal of consistent self-esteem for kids have a powerful hold on today's parents, especially those who are financially secure, who have had unparalleled control over their children's lives and who are devoting themselves to being “great” parents. Research tells us that college-educated mothers are spending much more direct face time with their children than they used to, from eleven to twenty-one hours per week, almost double the number of hours that was typical twenty-five years ago, and parents are reading about parenting much more.

Fifty years or more of writings about psychotherapy and a growing body of research about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has changed the way we think about the resilience of our children. We know so much now about the ways in which children can be damaged for life: by sexual abuse, by constant belittling criticism from a parent, by an undiagnosed learning disability in school, by social isolation and bullying. Once you learn about all the possible threats to a child's emotional well-being it makes you want to protect them against emotional trauma to the nth degree. Once a parent reads that depressed children suffer from low self-esteem, he wants to be able to help his child achieve good self-esteem all the time. It isn't irrational

for parents to ask about self-esteem. The impulse to protect all of your child's feelings is completely natural. The problem is that the ideal is unachievable, even undesirable.

You cannot, and you should not, make yourself responsible for your child's continual sense of self-confidence, for three reasons. First, children are often going to lack confidence just because they are children. Second, if you are constantly scaffolding your children's every experience at every moment, he or she will not truly learn to be competent. Third, and most important, self-esteem is not the engine of learning; it is the by-product of learning. Children don't learn because they feel good about themselves; they feel good because they have mastered something.

"He just gives up," parents say about their son who really wishes he were better at this sport or that game or special interest. Well, perhaps he needs to practice more or consider doing something else that comes more naturally to him. Learning to manage your sense of inadequacy is something all children need to do. We expect that with repeated experiences over time, children's skill levels will grow and they will gain mastery over their feelings of discouragement.

Not all bad or sad feelings are evidence of a child being traumatized. William Damon, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, addressed this issue in his book *Greater Expectations*. He believes that the public's knowledge of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder has subtly undermined our appreciation of children's natural resilience. Instead of seeing our child on the edge of mastering a challenge, we see a child about to be overwhelmed whose self-respect will never recover, and, therefore, a child who needs our protection.

This is the story I am hearing from elementary school principals everywhere. Parents rush in to rescue their children from difficult but ordinary social situations, claiming that their sons and daughters are being bullied. Other parents worry that their

children will be traumatized because they cannot master a skill, are getting disciplined by the school, or weren't chosen for a select team or class. If you get cut from a high school varsity team, it can be emotionally painful, a real bummer, but is that a life-long trauma? If your parents believe you've been traumatized and become enraged at the varsity soccer coach, it makes it difficult for a child to recover.

Martin Seligman, the famed University of Pennsylvania psychologist and the father of positive psychology, argues that both American psychology and American parents head down a dead-end road when they become so invested in the maintenance of self-esteem. After promoting self-esteem for two decades we are seeing increased levels of depression and anxiety in our young people, not the higher levels of self-confidence for which we hoped. It turns out that telling children they are great and wonderful just doesn't help them all that much. It actually makes them suspicious of adults because they can see with their own eyes that they are not as good at doing some stuff as other children. Self-esteem comes from the repeated experiences of building skills and mastering more and more challenging situations. The term *developmentally appropriate* means that your child is being presented with challenges that are at the right level: not crushingly hard, not ridiculously easy, but developmentally just within his or her grasp. It will take a stretch, but he or she can do it.

Sometimes the greatest sense of mastery comes from succeeding in a situation where you have tasted defeat, been really upset, and then come back to triumph. If your child arrives at sleep-away camp and cannot pass the swim test that everyone else in the cabin passes on the first day, he or she is likely going to feel bad about it. No way around it. However, when the child manages to pass the swim test at the beginning of the second week—or whenever continued effort eventually leads to success—he or

she is going to have a wonderful feeling of achievement, like nothing else.

Here's the hard part for parents: it is far more likely that the child will pass the swim test under the gaze of a nineteen-year-old counselor or a twenty-seven-year-old waterfront director than he or she would with you, especially on the confidence-shaking second or third try. When a child is anxious and frightened, it sets off a parent's anxious identification, and when the child then sees worry in the parent's face—or, worse yet, a forced cheerfulness that doesn't fool a child for a second—it makes the child even more anxious. Parental efforts to provide continual encouragement and scaffolding can also undermine a child's confidence.

It is a rare parent who can remain totally objective when their child is falling apart, confident that he or she will certainly feel better in a few minutes after passing the swim test. Because camp professionals have seen so many children look frightened, tremble, cry, and then succeed, they can manifest a sense of confidence that is tough for any parent to feel.

And here's the kicker: When a child accomplishes something away from her parents, she can be absolutely sure that she owns the accomplishment. When your parents are not there, you can be sure that no one else did it for you. In his gut a child thinks: *My mom didn't supervise it, my mom did not arrange it, I did just what all the other kids had to do. Therefore, I earned the self-confidence that comes with that achievement.*

3. *We cannot make friends for our children  
or micromanage their friendships*

Human beings are social animals. Our children are born with the ability to connect, to be kind, and to make friends. If you watch a baby sitting on his mother's lap, you may notice that he

is utterly transfixed by the sight of another infant on another mother's lap who looks just like him. *Wham!* It is love at first sight. As soon as they are able to crawl they can choose a "friend" to sit near. They may not yet be old enough to talk or coordinate their play, but it is quite clear that children are powerfully attracted to each other. Researchers in day care settings have observed that children's moods are better when they are sitting near a child of their own choice; and if that is true at fourteen months, it is absolutely true when they are fourteen years old.

However, the two essential ingredients in friendship that we cannot arrange or actually teach our children directly are mutuality and reciprocity. Don't we teach them to share toys and take turns? Of course, but that is not the same as the mutuality that emerges within a friendship. It is your child's friend who reminds him forcefully not to be annoying, who says, "I don't want to do that anymore. We've played your game long enough." It is your daughter's fourth-grade friend whose feelings get hurt by your child and who says to her, "You're not my friend anymore," at which point your daughter cries and withdraws, or else she scrambles to reassure her friend that she is still her buddy.

The cues that children give one another are different from the ones that parents give, but they are often just as powerful. In short, it is children who teach one another to be friends. We can model friendship for them—mainly in our own adult friendships—and we can teach them some of the skills that they will need, but in the final analysis, friends teach each other friendship. Children experience themselves as inventing, or at least discovering, friendship on their own. The power, the satisfactions, and the joys that can come from it are all a child's creation. A girl's best friend is the best friend ever and her group is the original, never duplicated, most special group that ever

was, because she and her friends made it so. No one gives their parents credit for their friendships, and almost never do children thank their parents for either knowing a lot about their friendships or saving them from bad friendships.

Everything about friendship and group membership has to be experienced. And what are the very best friendships of all? I would argue that they are the ones you truly make on your own, with another child whom you have found at school or in an after-school activity, someone with whom you have grown close just because you really liked each other. “Mom, I made a new friend,” has to be one of the signature shouts of a child’s independence because his mother doesn’t yet know anything about the other child. As a parent you can support your children’s friendships, you can give your children a place to play or hang out, you can order the pizza and surround their friendships with love, but you cannot micromanage the details of the friendship. If you try, it isn’t your child’s friendship.

*4. We cannot successfully double as our  
child’s agent, manager, and coach*

One of the things that distinguishes the parents of this generation from prior generations is that they know more about child development and brain development than ever before. That’s all to the good. What has not been helpful is that all of the knowledge has encouraged parents to think that they can, and must, manage all aspects of their child’s growth.

Parenting always involves some aspects of coaching and managing, and sometimes those are the most appealing aspects of the job. Research shows that the fathers of teenage boys are happiest when they are in the role of coach (although this doesn’t mean that their sons are happy about it). I understand the temptation to coach. My daughter, Joanna, played twelve seasons of

varsity sports in high school, three sports every year for four years (clearly not cursed with either my lack of coordination or my fears). My completely unexpected role as the father of a good athlete gave me the opportunity to share the sidelines with other parents for more than a decade. I witnessed the over-invested, determined coaching parent in action and it was not a pretty sight. Watching manager-coach parents, it has always baffled me why they focus on such a narrow range of physical skills (“Why didn’t you stick check him?”) when the most important skills their children are going to need in the years to come, according to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (a national organization that advocates for the readiness of every student), are teamwork, collaboration, creativity, responsibility, self-direction, and an ethical sense.

There’s an appeal to being your child’s teacher, and when you and your child share a natural gift—be it for sports, music, math or any other area of endeavor—it may seem logical to play coach. A few parents seem to be able to coach or manage their child’s career to a high level right through adolescence. But I would argue that these cases are the exception, and, beyond professional accomplishment, often come at a heavy price to the parent-child relationship. At a certain point, as the child becomes both older and more accomplished, the stakes become higher and the parent’s role as coach and manager begins to distort the parent-child relationship, or the parent-child relationship interferes with the coaching relationship. Parents already have so much power in their children’s lives, to add the roles of coach and manager to that of parent is to tip the balance in a way that puts the child’s mental health at risk.

Ambitious parents with athletically talented children might want to read *Open*, Andre Agassi’s compelling memoir in which, among other things, he chronicles his father’s obsession with making his children into tennis stars. He tells in excruciating

detail the way their father destroyed the confidence of Andre's brother and sister by pushing them too hard, and how the father finally earned the undying hatred of his champion son. If tennis does not speak to you, then I recommend Fred Waitzkin's *Searching for Bobby Fisher*. Waitzkin, a writer for *Sports Illustrated*, unexpectedly fathered a chess prodigy and wrote a wonderful reflection about the perils of managing his son's chess career—until he had the wisdom to step aside.

Chess, the violin, baseball, or golf, the sport or instrument or talent doesn't matter. If a parent wants to manage his or her child's way to success, it is important to remember that it has the potential to enrich the parent-child bond, and to burden it; and there is always a risk that the level of parental involvement may poison the enterprise for a child. I will never forget a boy I saw in psychotherapy, a varsity basketball player who quit the team in the fall of his senior year just to punish his sports-mad father. "That's all he cares about in my life," the boy said.

No matter what a child's talents or aspirations, the wise parent, sooner rather than later, turns the job of coach and manager over to a trusted other.

##### *5. We cannot give our child the "second family" they need*

Even in the most wonderful family, as children grow up there are developmental tensions and conflicts that cannot be resolved. There may be a temperamental mismatch between one parent and child, one sibling who requires more care, or one child who is driven to push the envelope of family structure, thereby driving everyone crazy.

Teens in particular have a strong drive for independence. Think of how crucial a driver's license is to a sixteen-year-old's sense of identity and maturity. Adolescents often experience their parents as unable to acknowledge their grown-up status

and push against the old rules. Most families struggle to open up space for their teenager's growing autonomy. There isn't a teen in the world who has not had the furious feeling—at least for a moment—that he or she was really meant to be raised by some different, better family where there would be more recognition for his or her maturity. There isn't a mom and dad who hasn't, in the middle of a fight, wished his or her child were living elsewhere. My wife and I have an old sign tacked up in our kitchen that reads:

TEENAGERS.

Tired of being harassed by your stupid parents?

ACT NOW.

Move out. Get a job.

Pay your bills while you still know everything.

Now that we have a married daughter and a son in college, the sign makes us nostalgic. We would like to have our children back in the house more, but there were certainly times in their teenage years when their presence was almost unbearable. What helps the tension when teenagers and parents are fed up with each other? The answer is often a second family. In his book *The Second Family*, Ron Taffel writes that the peer group typically serves that function for adolescents. He is right, and teens need friends. The problem is that adolescents are more apt to engage in risk-taking behaviors with a group of peers than they are alone. Beyond that, what every parent should hope for is that their child has a close, confiding relationship with another adult outside the family who respects the child's gifts, provides a different model of a caring adult, and exercises a nonjudgmental restraining influence.

Many adolescents adopt a friend's house as their base of operations or adopt someone else's mom or dad as their backup

parent. Many children develop a powerful relationship with a coach or aunt or grandparent. These relationships are less tension-filled than the relationship with their own parent. The wise parent is glad when this happens; the unwise parent feels jilted and sulks. The wise parent understands that the child not only feels that his maturity may be more recognized outside of the house, but knows that her child is probably more mature in the presence of that other parental figure. If a teen admires another parent or coach, it will bring out the best in him or her.

Of course, our first families sometimes do bring out the best in us, but more often they happen to bring out the worst in us, too. We are needier and whinier with our moms and dads, brothers and sisters than we are with almost anyone else. That eighteen-year period of prolonged human dependence that I mentioned earlier in this chapter makes family relationships so intense, with such strong feelings of love, anger, disappointment, and yearning, that Sigmund Freud called it the “family romance.” Most of us spend a good part of our psychological lives trying to figure out our relationships with our parents, and we wonder if our parents ever really saw us for who we were.

In adolescence, one of the first steps in the creation of an adult identity is to find a mentor or adopt another family that makes us feel understood. I have seen that happen between families in the same neighborhoods, on town sports teams, in schools, and especially in settings where a child is far away from his or her parents. It is a bit easier for children to show high levels of respect and even love for that second family when their parents are not around because there is always a bit of disloyalty to one’s own family involved in the selection of a second family. That is why a child’s parents cannot pick a mentor or second family for their own children. The child has to choose that person or family on his or her own because psychologically it involves a move away.

*6. We cannot compete with our child's electronic world*

We are living in the midst of an accelerating technological revolution that is changing the habits of both parents and children and childrearing itself. CNN reported that half of the mothers who own smart phones hand the phone to their children under the age of two to keep them occupied when they are in a restaurant or store. Many smart phones have apps specifically designed for younger children. When PBS released its iPad app in 2010 that gives children easy access to one thousand streaming PBS videos and games, it reported in a survey that 70 percent of parents said their children used their parents' iPads; 40 percent said their children used their iPads at least once per day. Parents had an average of eight apps on their iPads specifically for their kids and they praised the educational value of these applications. These users are largely children under the age of six; after seven, the use of electronic devices increases dramatically. By the time they are in their mid-teens, American children are spending fifty-three hours per week in front of screens: television, social networking sites, cell phones, and video games. The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that there was more change in children's usage of electronic media in the two years from 2008 to 2010 than there had been in the previous thirty years. By the time this book is published, many more changes will have intensified the relationship between children and technology.

I'll talk more specifically about children and electronics in the camp setting in the next chapter, but overall the impact of technology on society is a subject so vast I cannot, as a psychologist, do an adequate job of either describing it or analyzing it. It is also a moving target and the results are not in yet on how it will change our brains and behavior. What I can say is that parents ask me all the time what to do about the intensity of

their child's attachment to electronic devices. Their children appear to be more interested in their cell phones than they are in family dinner or almost anything else. They tell me that their children no longer want to play outside, that boys, especially, cannot get friends to come over to the house unless the group can play online or other screen games. They ask me whether they should allow their eleven-year-old to have a Facebook account (Facebook recommends thirteen as the minimum age), whether playing violent screen games will make their teenage sons violent, or whether they should be reading their middle-school daughter's text messages to make sure that she isn't involved in online bullying or social advances from strangers.

The parents who ask me these questions are clearly worried about the impact of technology on their children's brain development, values, and social interactions and capabilities. Parents rightly fear that their children are losing the creative, imaginative play of childhood that parents once enjoyed as children. They wish very much that they could limit their children's use of electronics. In spite of their hopes and fears about what might be happening to their children's lives, most parents find it very hard to limit their children's access to technology for four reasons: These devices are new and unknown. Most parents do not have a model from their own childhood about how to set limits and boundaries on things like cell phones. Many of these devices have an educational purpose (try contradicting your high school student's contention that he or she is ". . . doing my homework!" on the laptop). And electronic devices are increasingly necessary to our lives and they are psychologically addictive.

Research suggests that all of us—children *and* adults—are spending equal amounts of time in front of lit-up screens. The oldest axiom in parenting is that children will do what we do, not what we say. They watch us, and they are never fooled. Our children model themselves on our addictions, our rationaliza-

tions, our materialism, and our willingness to buy them all we can afford to buy them. They may even come to think that material things, especially electronics, are the best expression of parental love. “Don’t you love me?” their beautiful faces ask, “Won’t you buy me a cell phone?”

In the last five years, the only place I haven’t seen children using cell phones is sleepaway camp. It is so unusual to see a group of twelve-year-olds without handheld electronic devices that seeing them that way at camp is startling. At most camps, the children have turned in their cell phones and there are no computers for them to use. And they thrive. They are happy and they are proud of themselves. The lesson of living simply is one that children need to learn, and one that parents with a house full of gadgets are having trouble teaching.

7. *We cannot keep our children perfectly safe,  
but we can drive them crazy trying*

For the last fifty years a great many Americans have migrated away from crowded cities with high crime rates to raise their children in “safe” suburbs with good neighborhood schools. But somewhere along the way we lost our internal sense of safety. We don’t trust our neighbors or the streets; we worry constantly about strangers and pedophiles. We watch cable television and are now acutely aware of all the terrible things that can happen to children. We no longer trust that our kids will be all right.

One mother of three children ages eleven, eight, and seven told me that her family lives only three blocks from their elementary school. “I know I should let my kids walk, but I just can’t,” she said. The intense guilt in her voice signaled that she believed she was depriving her children of some important childhood experience. She continued, “I’ve always driven my children to school. I can’t stop doing it, even though I know I should.”

Why does she feel so guilty? After all, she's only doing what most American parents are doing. She is keeping her children safe by driving right to the door of the school, and then picking them up at the same door at the end of the day, and she has plenty of company. Forty years ago, 41 percent of children in the United States walked to school; now only 13 percent of children do so. Forty years ago, 87 percent of children who lived within a mile of school walked or biked to school alone. Now, it seems, even children who still walk to school have a parent at their side, and, if they are permitted, some parents walk them all the way to the classroom.

The fact that most American children no longer walk to school is only one symptom of our hyper-vigilance. In his book *The Power of Play*, David Elkind cites studies that children have lost ten to twelve hours of independent play per week over the last twenty years. American children are not biking to school, they are not roaming in the woods; often, they are not even playing in their backyards. They are sitting indoors, watching television or playing on the computers, close by their parents. If they are outside, it is in adult-organized team sports.

Much of that loss of free play is due to our worry about their safety, or our assumption that time spent with us or supervised by other parents is always preferable to time they might spend alone.

What have children gotten in return for their loss of outside free time? The answer might be parental attention. Tara Parker-Pope, the health reporter for *The New York Times*, writes that before 1995 mothers spent an average of about twelve hours per week attending to the needs of their children, and by 2007 that number had almost doubled. College-educated women are leading this trend at 21.2 hours per week, but less educated women are increasingly tending their kids, too, up to 15.9 hours per week. Educated fathers are also increasing the amount of time they spend with their children, from 4.5 hours per week prior to

1995 to 9.6 hours per week; high school–educated men are spending 6.8 hours per week, up from 3.7, according to Betsey Stevenson and Dan Sacks at the University of Pennsylvania. When you combine these statistics with the fact that the divorce rate is dropping, it is clear that children are getting more of their parents together and separately than they did in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. It could be said that we are living in a Golden Age of Parental Attention. With experts like Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *Outliers*, urging them on, parents who are financially able to do so are doing everything in their power to raise “cultivated” children. Often they are also raising overprotected children.

As someone who makes his living writing parenting books and running parent workshops, I can hardly afford to criticize mothers and fathers who are trying to do a really good job of raising their children, and who are consulting experts to get it right. Yet all this parental attention makes me a bit uneasy. I am not sure that it serves children well. At some point, the effort to provide safety becomes a constant bath of parental anxiety, and too much parental attention starts to suffocate a child’s capacity for independence.

#### *8. We cannot make our children independent*

In *Stand by Me*, the Rob Reiner movie based on a Stephen King short story, four thirteen-year-old boys, all close friends, lie to their parents about the adventure they have impulsively planned. They grab their sleeping bags and a bit of money and head out along the railroad tracks for an overnight hike to find the body of a boy who was reportedly hit by a train but who has not yet been found. The boys crave the adventure and the possibility of local fame by finding the corpse. In the rugged hunt, two of them almost die themselves. In one unforgettable scene, two

of the boys are trapped on a railroad bridge by an oncoming train bearing down on them. The characters in the film believe that their two-day adventure was the peak experience of their boyhoods, their “sweetest moment” as friends.

In the magical film *Hugo*, the young Hugo says it succinctly when his friend questions the wisdom of their sleuthing. “We could get into trouble,” she says. To which Hugo smiles and replies, “That’s how you know it’s an adventure!”

Not all children need a high-risk action adventure to develop independence, though almost all have to do something daring—perhaps something that their parents wouldn’t approve of—in order to feel independent. In our society today there are fewer and fewer “journeys to manhood,” as Bret Stephenson describes in *From Boys to Men*, and of course the same is true for young women. Some seek out different kinds of challenges to test themselves, improvising their own rites of passage. At times the challenge arrives unbidden in a family or community crisis. Sometimes children move easily into a growing sense of independence and sometimes a worried parent blocks the way.

At a morning coffee in an international school in Prague, a mother stood up and told the following story about her exchange with her fifteen-year-old son. He came to her one Friday afternoon and said, “Mom, I want to go out with my friends and walk around Prague tonight.” His wish—call it a request—started the following conversation.

“Where are you going to go?” she inquired.

“We’re just going to walk around the city,” he replied, probably a bit annoyed with his mother who surely should know that Prague is one of the safest walking cities in the world. Everybody walks in Prague.

“But where?” she persisted.

“I don’t know. We’re just going to walk.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked, shifting her question slightly.

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean, nothing?”

“I told you—we’re going to walk.”

“Are you going to drink?” she persisted.

“Mom,” he replied, increasingly annoyed, “if I want to drink in Prague, I could do that anytime.” Was his mother so naive that she didn’t know how easy it is to get alcohol in the Czech Republic? Had it not occurred to her that he drank when he wished at friends’ homes?

“Are you going to go to clubs?”

“No, Mom.”

“Well, if you aren’t going to clubs, where are you going?”

Now she was doubling back to her original question.

His growing exasperation suddenly turned into a steely tone. “Mom, I’m not going out with my friends tonight.”

Surprised by this sudden change, but a bit relieved and then guilty, she asked, “You’re not?” And then, “Why not?”

“Mom,” he said, “you’re just not psychologically ready for me to go.”

Embarrassed, she had come to my parenting coffee to ask me, “Did I do the right thing?” Like any good psychologist, I began to ask her questions about whether her son had earned her mistrust, whether he had a bad track record, whether his friends were pretty reliable and good students. Before I had finished, she reflected, “I think I’m just anxious. I probably should have let him go.”

A swimming coach in Massachusetts remarked to me that she’s worried about kids today. Her tenth-grade swimmers show up at competitive meets without their goggles and excuse it by

saying, “My mom must not have put them in my gym bag.” When fifteen-year-olds cannot remember their goggles, is it because they are incredibly disorganized, or because their mother is doing their remembering for them? The swim coach, whom I was interviewing about her children’s camp experience, recalls that she sent her disorganized twelve-year-old son off to a camp where he had to go out on trips. She imagines he left a trail of socks, T-shirts, and underwear through the woods. “I’m sure he arrived back at the base camp with only one sock and no underwear, but then he learned. After that he probably kept track of his clothes.”

Every child has to practice being independent and every parent has to practice letting his or her child be independent. Independence is like high jumping. You can’t clear the bar from a standing position. You have to run and jump and sometimes fail, then move the bar up and run and jump again. Over and over. As the parent, you have to watch them do it; you wince when they hit the bar, but you cannot do it for them and, unlike the SATs, you can’t arrange to have a tutor suddenly make it happen. Only the child can do it.

Once you accept the idea that you cannot *make* your children independent; once you accept the reality that you have to let them try things and fail, once you relieve yourself of the responsibility of preparing your son or daughter completely for the outside world (as if anyone is ever fully prepared for the world), when he or she steps out the door into the big city, you will be in a much better position to appreciate what does happen to them when they are away from you, and what they make happen for themselves. Oh, there will be scary moments; they will take some risks and they will learn some lessons the hard way. That’s going to happen, but they will also test and internalize their fundamental values, and grow morally stronger as a result. They will become more productive than you could ever have

imagined when you saw them spending hours on Facebook and *not* doing their homework on a Sunday afternoon. They will also meet people who love them, friends and mentors whose love they will return in the fullest measure. It will bring tears to your eyes to see how much your child can be loved and how powerfully she can return that love.

Finally, and maybe painfully, they will have a lot of sweet moments without you there to see them happen. If you believe that your job is to raise your children so they can leave you, there is only one way to know whether you have done your job: to let them go and watch from a distance as they grow into independence.

