

Mrs Dowdell's Parenting Pointers

Balancing act

Here's the irony; many of us are terrified about letting our children out into the big wide world on their own. So, we let them sit in front of screens and give them access to a whole other virtual world, which seems to me even more frightening and potentially damaging. How do we prepare our children for the world, both real and virtual, balanced with how do we keep them safe? Here are some thoughts ...

Somehow we have to help our children make the transition from little ones who need to hold our hands whenever we're out and about, to young people who are able to be independent. We need to equip and enable our children to make good choices and move towards independence. Hopefully, (and whether we like it or not) sooner or later our children will leave home. Our job is to let them go, bit by bit, depending on their age and level of maturity. It might begin by allowing them to walk without holding our hand, or letting them run ahead to an agreed point (like a lamp post or the house with the red door, or whatever). They need to earn our trust so that we can gradually allow them to go further and further. Most secondary school children make their own way to school but that won't happen overnight. How can we help them take little steps along the way?

I can still remember the first time I let my eldest go to Sainsbury's on her own. We discussed the exact route she would take, where she would cross the road, what she was buying and how much money she would need. I can remember staring out of our front window, looking up the road, watching the clock and trying to decide at what point I should start really panicking. I remember calculating all the places she could get run over, being convinced that she would drop the £10 note I had given her. In those very long minutes while I waited for her, all manner of terrible things could have happened and believe me, I imagined them all. But of course she was fine and had a tremendous sense of achievement that she had done it.



In the same way we need to prepare our children for the digital world. Children are getting lots of input from school about staying safe online but are we re-enforcing that at home? Do we know all the websites our children are visiting, do we know who they are talking to when they are playing online games or using social media, do we limit the times when they can access technology? If our older children have phones, we have the right, in fact I would say, the duty, to check them regularly to

see who they are talking to and what they are saying. Over time we can gradually give more freedom, but they need our guidance to make good choices.

My concern for our children is that on the one hand, we are wrapping them so tightly in cotton wool that we don't allow them to play outside with their friends or walk home from school, while on the other hand we are letting them explore the online world with no boundaries whatsoever. Why not come up with a plan to begin to give our children an appropriate level of freedom in the real world whilst making sure we are in control of their virtual world?

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