FREEDOM · AN EVIDENCE-BASED ESSAY FOR PARENTS

Age Sets the Floor. Readiness Sets the Pace.

For the library ride, “twelve” stood for a route, two crossings and a call

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Picture a Saturday morning in spring.

Your daughter is ten. She is standing at the back door with her helmet already buckled, asking if she can ride her bike to the library by herself. It is eight blocks. She knows the way. She has ridden it beside you more times than either of you could count.

At the sink, you hear yourself answer before you have decided anything.

“When you’re twelve.”

“Why twelve?”

It is a fair question, and you do not have a good answer. Twelve is the number your mother used. Or it is when your cousin was allowed. Or it is just far enough away that you do not have to think about it today.

She unbuckles the helmet and goes upstairs. She does not slam the door, which is somehow worse.

You stay at the sink a minute longer, because there is another half to this. On Thursday, the same girl could not get herself out the door for piano without three reminders. On Wednesday she cried over a page of fractions until you pulled a chair up beside her. On the bike, she may well be ready. On Thursday afternoon, she was not ready for much.

Both of those girls are ten.

And under her question sits the one you ask yourself, with your hands in the water: *Am I holding her back? Or would saying yes be letting go too soon?*

“She’ll get more when she’s older”

Here is the belief behind “twelve,” in your words:

Freedom comes with age. She’ll get more when she’s older.

A good deal of it is true.

Some freedoms rightly wait for a birthday. Federal law lets 14- and 15-year-olds work only limited hours in certain safe jobs, and keeps everyone under 18 out of hazardous work. States can be stricter.

Age is not nothing inside a child, either. The psychologist Laurence Steinberg, a leading researcher on adolescence, argues that self-control keeps developing through adolescence and into young adulthood, while the pull toward risk, especially around friends, makes mid-adolescence a vulnerable time. A fourteen-year-old who rides to the library sensibly on her own may ride differently with three friends and a dare.

And the belief carries an instinct worth keeping: that children grow into freedom, that it comes in time, and that there is no prize for rushing. Much of the research below backs that instinct more than you might expect.

So age matters. The open question is whether it is the only measure, or a floor with something else on top of it.

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A rule built for a building

“When you’re older” is a sentence most of us learned before we could argue with it.

Many of us remember learning it at school, where freedom seemed to arrive by grade. The whole class got the locker, the walk to the next room alone, the open lunch, on the same day, because the calendar turned. Nobody in the class earned it. The date handed it out.

There is a good reason for that. One adult with twenty-five children cannot judge readiness child by child, week by week, for every kind of freedom. A rule that is the same for everyone is a rule nobody has to argue about. For a building full of children, the calendar is a sensible tool.

Even in a building, it does not always fit. In 1993, the psychologist Jacquelynne Eccles and colleagues argued that some troubles of early adolescence come from a mismatch between what growing children need and what their schools and families offer them. They called it stage–environment fit. A National Research Council panel later summed up their work on the move into junior high: those schools often failed to fit young adolescents’ stage of development. It is an idea, not a settled finding, but it puts the trouble in the fit, not in the children, and not in the people working in those schools.

The theory's authors apply it to homes as well as schools. And if you are like many of us, the calendar rule came home with you, because it was the rule you knew. At home it has extra charms. It sounds fair between brothers and sisters: *he waited until twelve, so you wait until twelve.* It needs no explaining. It lets a tired parent say no without a debate at the back door.

The number itself has moved, though. In England, the share of primary-school children allowed to walk home from school alone fell from 86 percent in 1971 to 25 percent by 2010, according to surveys summarized in a 2023 review. In a 2020 British survey of 1,919 parents of children aged 5 to 11, the age parents reported for their children being allowed out alone averaged about 10¾. That is almost two years later than the parents remembered being allowed out themselves.† Neither figure says which age is right. They say only that, in Britain at least, "older" has moved within living memory.

And a calendar rule leaves you holding something heavy. It gives you one tool, a date, for a judgment with two sides. Give freedom too early, and you worry about what can happen out there. Hold it too long, and you worry about what she is not learning in here, while she cannot see anything she could do to earn it. So the weighing falls back on you, alone at the sink, with a number and your gut.

The calendar rule also has a twin, and the two can live side by side in one house. Call it drift. Some freedoms never get a birthday at all. They simply arrive, because nobody decided. The afternoon alone at home gets a little longer each year. The screen that was for car trips is now for evenings. The friend's house becomes three friends' houses. No one sat down and judged whether she was ready for any of it; the days just added up. Drift is not neglect. It is what happens in busy houses where no rule fits the thing in front of you, and it happens to careful parents too.

So the default can miss in two directions, and from where you stand you cannot see which. The date may hold some freedoms back past the point she was ready. Drift may let others go before anyone looked. Both are what you get when a household has only a date, or nothing at all, to go by.

If that question keeps you up some nights, you are not failing at it. It is a hard question, and you have been answering it with very little help.

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"Would saying yes be letting go too soon?"

Start with the second half of your question, because there the signal is plainer, though still thin. It was done with teenagers, or with adults looking back on their teens, so read it as the shape of the risk, not a verdict on a ten-year-old.

In two large German surveys, young and middle-aged adults remembered when they had been given freedom over their curfew as teenagers. Those who remembered getting it early tended to be less well adjusted, across

several parts of life, in both surveys.

Notice how “early” was measured there: by age. If you are the parent who said “twelve,” the clearer warning in that study is about freedom that came early. That is a point for the floor.

A second study watched families more closely. It followed 206 boys from higher-risk neighborhoods in Oregon to age 18. The ones most likely to be in trouble at 18 had both troubled friends and parents whose supervision fell away early, often after the trouble and the friends had already appeared. The researchers called that falling-away “premature autonomy.” What it measured was supervision fading under strain, not a freedom handed over on purpose with a parent still close by. It is not a story about careless parents. The researchers describe parents reducing their involvement and guidance in the face of a son’s hard behavior and hard friends.

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“Am I holding her back?”

The first half of your question has been studied too, but what the research found there is a different kind of thing.

A review that pooled 47 studies of children from toddlers to the late teens looked at parenting and anxiety. Seven of those studies measured autonomy-granting itself, and in them, parents who granted little autonomy tended to have more anxious children. The studies cannot say which came first: an anxious child may draw a tighter rein. And parenting explained only a small share of children’s anxiety.

That is a finding about how much say parents give in general, not about whether your daughter rides to the library at ten or at twelve. No study we found tested one freedom held back, or given late, at her age. The closest evidence is those curfew surveys again. Adults who remembered getting curfew freedom late looked mixed in the younger survey, with fewer behavior problems but lower mood and less chance of having a partner. In the older survey, they did well. Some things better, some worse, then fine: a weaker signal than the one about early freedom, and it does not point one way.

What you can see is closer to home. A helmet unbuckled. A quiet walk upstairs. A girl who asked a fair question and could not see anything she could do to change the answer. No study weighs that. You can, and it is the part of “holding her back” you can see.

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Freedom is not the same as being left alone

When you picture saying yes to the bike, you may picture her gone: out the door, out of reach, on her own. Researchers who study autonomy separate two things parents often run together. One is independence, which means doing it without you. The other is autonomy, which means doing it because she owns it. The second can grow inside a close relationship. So a yes to the bike does not have to mean stepping away.

In three Belgian samples of teenagers and young adults, describing their own parents, helping a child act from reasons she actually holds went with better adjustment. Encouraging her to do things on her own added nothing beyond that. (The essay *Learner-Led Doesn't Mean Left Alone* goes through the wider research on supporting a child's autonomy.)

With a ten-year-old, you are the one who knows whether a wish is hers or whether someone pushed her toward it. At the back door, nobody pushed. She asked. And a yes can keep you close: through the route you ride together first, and the call when she gets there.

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A line that slopes

How do you hand something over gradually? Teachers have a picture for it.

In 1983, the reading researchers P. David Pearson and Margaret Gallagher drew it as a diagonal line. At one end, a task is all the teacher's responsibility. At the other, it is all the student's. In between sits guided practice, the stage where the teacher gradually releases the task to the student.

It is a teachers' model for reading, used here only as an analogy, but it gives you a picture. Eccles and some of the same colleagues had proposed a similar shape for adolescence in 1991: children do best, they suggested, when adults loosen control gradually, as a child's own wish for autonomy grows. Freedom does not have to be a switch that flips on a birthday. It can be a slope.

The steps on a slope can be small. In studies with children and adults, mostly experiments, choice helped motivation a little, most when the choices were few and small. Carried home, that suggests *Ride or walk?* is a different gift from *do whatever you like today.*

You may know one sloped freedom from driving: the graduated driver's license, with a permit first, then limits on night driving and passengers, then the full license. In one national study, the strongest step-by-step rules went with about a quarter fewer fatal crashes among 16-year-olds than in states with none of those rules, though the same study found somewhat more at 18, which later work disputes. And age mattered too: the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reports that raising the licensing age from 16 to 17 is associated with a 13 percent lower fatal crash rate among 15- to 17-year-olds.

Driving is a different world from bikes and libraries. Still, it is a familiar case where both things hold at once. In the driving data, a later start goes with fewer crashes. So does staging the freedom.

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The same kind of freedom, the same age

Of the studies here that looked at the risk of one ordinary freedom, one came closest to your daughter's age. The freedom was time after school with friends and no adult around.

Researchers followed 438 American twelve- and thirteen-year-olds, in a study from the 1990s, for one year. A telephone interview recorded how they spent their time after school. The study's published summary, which gives no sizes, reports that the unsupervised time went with more behavior problems a year later mainly when parents kept loose track and the neighborhood felt unsafe, and only for children who already had behavior problems.

The same kind of freedom. The same age. In that one study, it went with trouble for some children and not for others.

That study compared different children, and its summary reports no measure of skills like knowing a route, so carrying it to one child, and to readiness, is our reading. But you may have seen something like it at home: the same girl ready to ride to the library alone, and not ready to ride to the mall with a crowd.

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What you were already doing

Go back to the back door, and to the belief you started with.

If "older" keeps moving, what are parents actually going by? Studies of getting around alone, across many countries, give part of the answer. Whether a child may go alone tracks her age, but also her parents' read of her competence, and how close things are.

One long study inside families looked at decisions. Researchers followed 201 European American families, each with two children, and asked the parents over the years how much say each child had in eight kinds of decisions, from about age 9 to 20. By the parents' own account, decision-making freedom "increased gradually across middle childhood and adolescence before rising sharply in late adolescence." It also differed from child to child. Among other things, children whom parents saw as easier to supervise got more say.

Those parents loosened the reins a little at a time, and partly by the child in front of them.

That describes what parents do; it does not show it works better than a date. But it is what you were doing at the sink. Part of you already knew the bike was close and Thursday was not. She can be ready to plan her own Tuesday of schoolwork and not ready to plan her own bedtime. She can be ready for the bike on Saturday and not yet for Thursday. None of that is a contradiction. Under “How old?” sat a better question: ready for what?

Age sets the floor. Readiness sets the pace.

Or, in the words you started with: *She’ll get more as she shows me she can carry it, inside the lines her age still draws.*

Nothing in that asks you to be less careful. The floor stays where the law, safety and your own sense of danger put it. What changes is that the judgment you were already making can be said out loud. Ready is not a mood, or a personality, or a birthday. It is whether she can do this particular thing, in this particular situation, with you still somewhere in the picture. A date treats her as if she grew up all of a piece. You have watched her grow up one situation at a time.

“Twelve” was standing in for things you can name. Knows the route. Stops at both crossings. Calls when she gets there. Comes home when she said she would. And one that no birthday can show you: who else is going. The same naming works on a freedom that drifted out without anyone deciding, like the evening screen.

Those can be shown, and once you name them, she can see them too. We think lines set before the ride, that she can see and meet, are a different thing from a rule that moves. What gets earned is room: the route, the hours, the say over her own time. Being heard, and being told the reason, never have to be.

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A Saturday, some months on

It is a Saturday in early fall. She is at the back door again, helmet buckled.

The conversation happened back in April, at the kitchen table, on the back of an envelope. Five things: the route, the two crossings, the call when she gets there, home by eleven, and alone or with a friend you both know, not a crowd. She rode it beside you three Saturdays in a row. Then you rode half a block behind her, close enough to see, far enough to keep quiet. Then you walked to the corner and watched her turn onto Elm.

One Saturday in June she took the long way past the park and came home twenty minutes late. The bike went back to “with me” until she had ridden the route beside you again and kept the clock. The next Saturday, it was hers again. Nobody shouted. It was on the envelope.

Today you are at the front window with your coffee going cold. Your phone buzzes on the counter. The message comes from the old phone, the one that lives in a drawer and only goes out for this. One word: *here*.

Some things have not changed. Thursday piano is still a three-reminder afternoon, and you still walk her out the door for that one. The evening tablet has its own short list now, on a second envelope stuck to the fridge.

This morning, over breakfast, her little brother asked the question younger children so often ask. “Why does *she* get to?”

You had an answer that was not a date. “Because she showed me. You’ll show me too. Want to start with the mailbox?”

At 10:50 the bike comes back up the drive. She leans it against the fence, takes off the helmet, and comes in talking about a book on volcanoes. She does not slam anything.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Who wrote this, and why

My name is George Weber. My wife, Jaclyn, and I have five children, all under eleven.

My second son is Jordy. When he was seven, we sat at the kitchen table after dinner, and I asked him to explain why reading and discussion were so hard. This is a boy who will stand at a workbench for hours without looking up. He taught his little brother and sister to ride a bike, and then to use a screw gun. He builds things I could not build. That night he kept his head down. Twice, all he gave me was “I don’t know.” Then he said it:

> “I’m just not good at school.”

He was not describing a difficulty. He was describing himself.

Here is the part I would rather not say. I had seen it coming for a while. That night I was interrogating a seven-year-old for a reason he did not have, when what he was really carrying was shame. And I kept sending him, because I could not see what else to do.

For years, Jaclyn had told me the truth about the other option. She would not become the entire staff of a school with five children in it, and if we did this, I would have to free at least fifteen hours a week. She was right on both counts, and I could not find the hours. So I know the arithmetic in these essays from the inside.

Before this work, I made more than $4 million building six personal-training studios. I have stepped away from them. I have given the next twenty years to two things: helping parents make the right choice for their own children, whatever that choice turns out to be, and helping lead what I believe is a coming change in how families educate their children.

I am not an academic. The research in these essays belongs to the people named in the sources. My job was to read it carefully and tell you what it says, and what it does not. That is why every essay ends with what it does not claim.

I wrote them for the parent I was that night at the kitchen table.

George Weber

FATHER OF FIVE

READ NEXT

He’s “Not a Self-Starter,” and You’ve Become His Calendar

If the freedom you are weighing is the freedom to run her own schoolwork, the next essay starts there

WHAT THIS ARTICLE DOES NOT CLAIM

- No study we found compares freedom earned by readiness with freedom given by age, in schools or in families. The case here rests on related research and reasoning, not proof.
- Some schools hand out freedom in earned levels. We found no independent study of those schools, or of the levels themselves. A RAND report found that, as of 2025, microschools' effects on academic achievement had not been rigorously evaluated.†
- Nearly all of this research shows links, not causes. A review of supportive teaching covering nearly 390,000 students says so plainly, and cautions that children already doing well may draw more support.
- We found almost nothing that tests the timing of freedom for children aged 7 to 11, and no study that tested a freedom plan at home. The choice studies, the Belgian samples, the reading model and the driving data come from other settings; carrying them to a family is our reasoning, not a result. No study we found shows that handing a freedom over in steps makes a child more ready for it; the slope rests on a proposal, a reading model and driving data.
- The mismatch idea is one possible explanation, not a proven one. It does reach the held-back side: the panel's summary tied the junior-high misfit to falling interest, motivation and learning. But it is a theory about schools and young teenagers, not a test of one freedom held back at home. Motivation does drift down across the school years, but a 2019 review that pooled 107 long-term studies found the drop small and not tied to the move to middle or high school.
- None of the family studies set a birthday against anything else. In the German surveys, early curfew freedom may also have stood for other things in those families, such as parents pulling back, so they warn about early freedom without showing that a later date is what protected anyone. The 438 children were all twelve or thirteen, so that study is silent on dates. Its links ran with parents' monitoring, how safe the neighborhood was judged to be, and prior behavior problems; we read only its summary, which gives no sizes. As far as that summary shows, the study counted time with friends and no adult present; it does not say whether the study recorded where they went or which friends. "Who else is going," on the parent's list, comes from the Oregon boys and from research on adolescents and friends, not from it.
- In the 201-family study, parents also gave more say to girls and to children of better-educated parents, which is not plainly about readiness. "Easier to supervise" is the parents' own view and a link: children given more say may also come to seem easier to supervise.
- Taking a freedom back after a slip, as the envelope does, is the part of this plan the parenting research would most question, and it is offered as our reasoning; no study we found tested a household list or how it feels to a child. Researchers who describe supportive parenting count

going easy on controlling conditions as part of it, and a 2025 review of classroom research separates structure, which the authors describe as a way to foster a child's sense of competence, from control, which they say takes it away. We think a line set in advance, visible and explained, sits on the structure side.

- The 2020 British survey sets parents' memories of their own childhood against the ages they reported for children aged 5 to 11. Memories of childhood are loose, and for the youngest children some reported ages may be expectations rather than events.
- Few studies have looked at what getting around alone does for children's development at all.
- † Figures that will date: the 2020 British survey; the 2025 RAND finding on microschools.
- The Saturday at the back door, the envelopes and the Saturday months on are illustrative composites, not a real family.

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