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### Letting Go

Autumn in Minnesota is beautiful and thought provoking. Leaves turn color and fall to the ground. But do the trees let go of the leaves so this can happen? Do the leaves force the separation? Is it a cooperative, joint effort, or is it resisted by one or the other? As parents, we are well aware of the eventual letting go, often visualized as the day we drive our children to college and drive home without them. Chances are they will be most ready if we have been gradually letting go for many years by then.

Parents say they hear mixed messages about what to hold onto and what to let go of. But children as young as nine or ten need real opportunities in their lives to practice making decisions, managing time and sorting priorities. This is how they develop a sense of themselves as people separate from parents and the decisions we would make for them, how we would manage their time and set their priorities. Since many years of practice will be needed and the stakes are not huge yet, it is best to begin letting go of academics as early as fourth grade (See Fading the Prompt).

On the other hand, older teenagers, if not appropriately supervised, may confront situations with life-changing ramifications. Holding on is especially important after they get their driver's license and begin dating and driving themselves home from weekend parties. This is the time for 11:00 curfews and a parent waiting for them with a hug, a kiss and a quick olfactory check. Teenagers are more likely to stay away from alcohol, tobacco and marijuana if they know there will be a loving parent waiting at the door who might smell what they have been up to. Similarly, parents of high school juniors and seniors should continue calling other parents about parties to make sure there will be a parent home. And in our home, we should be visibly present, keep backpacks by the front door and walk through often, filling up the chip bowl.

Some leaves drift gracefully and slowly to the ground, as if they are confident of a gentle fall and a welcome reception. They seem to be meandering, enjoying every moment of the transition from connection to tree to release. Other leaves “dive bomb” to the ground as if they finally convinced the tree to let go and now finally free, hurtle themselves to a rough landing.

This is complicated and important work. Our children need us to give a great deal of thought to how and when we hold on and let go. And while there are differences from child to child, a few general themes emerge. Younger students will benefit from the freedom to make mistakes while the consequences are still small. The battle over practicing music may damage the parent-child connection more than it is worth. As college approaches, choice of friends becomes more their call than ours. After all, we won't be at college with them. It is almost always better to have questionable decisions about friendships out of the way before our loving presence is removed. And high school students decide for themselves what sports to participate in and what courses to take.

There is nothing easy about letting go. At times, we would make a different decision than our children make and if our focus is too short-sighted we won't be able to see beyond the immediate. It is a hard sell to convince a parent to observe their fifth-grader wasting time on a weekend before a test without intervening. To do this, one must really believe that children will grow more from being held accountable (poor grade, loss of privilege, consequence) than they would have learned from being managed, nagged and prodded into using their time better.

So perhaps it comes down to this. Children need us to let go gradually and sometimes before they are ready. And maybe the only way for us to have the strength and confidence to step back from managing our children's lives is to maintain a long-term view. It just might be that our children will need us to be brave enough to let go gradually and often, even if it is not yet clear to us that they will float easily though that day's demands.