

“At What Age is it Appropriate to...”

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Keeping the balance between “what’s appropriate or important” and “what’s convenient or easy” is often tough to accomplish as a parent. For instance, let’s say that your four-year-old daughter is with her father at the mall and she has to go to the bathroom...and she means business when she wails “Right now!” No time for a quick run home...is it okay for Dad to take her into the Men’s room if there isn’t a “family friendly bathroom” available? And, when is it okay to discipline your child in public and what are some of the best ways to handle it? Let’s take a look at some of these tricky situations and how best to handle them.

Take your Little Girl into the Men’s Room?

Okay, it’s Daddy-daughter time and the twosome are at the mall doing a little shopping, letting Mom sleep in for a change. All’s well until the kid announces that she’s got to “go”, and from experience Dad knows that he’s only got a few minutes to help her get the deed done before an accident occurs. Most malls have gender-free restrooms and that’s always the best option. But in this case it happens to already be in use and a small line has formed outside. Now Dad has to decide whether to send her in alone to the Ladies’ room, or hope for the best and venture into the Men’s room together. When I first considered these options, my knee-jerk response was to do a quick fall-back to my normal stance—that *safety* comes first, always. In this case, it would be to opt for the parent being with the little girl, taking her into the Men’s room so that she could be supervised properly. But then I began to think about urinals and the possibility of her viewing male genitalia belonging to strangers and I began to wonder if my safety consciousness was overriding good judgment.

So, I performed a scientific poll...immediately. Well, it wasn’t really that scientific, but it did take only a few quick phone calls. I spoke with five pediatrician friends—three female and two male, and asked for their thoughts. Interesting results, but please take into account that this was a quick, “what-would-you-suggest” kind of analysis. All five agreed that the little lady should be with her father in the Men’s room, and that helping her to undress if need be and either standing in the stall with her or just in front of the closed door was the absolute best option. In fact the two guys noted that men stand in front of urinals in such a manner that their genitalia would not be easily exposed to the daughter if Dad quickly herded her into a stall. Or, he could check out the restroom first for an “all clear” before bringing her into it if need be. The three female pediatricians focused also upon safety and having a parent or older sib watching the youngster closely. One suggested to shorten the actual time in the Men’s room by not having the child wash her hands there, but that Dad could moisten some napkins in the water fountain and at least give the kid a quick hand wipe. Of course she suggested that *everyone* should keep a gallon or so of Purell in their glove compartment, and that a thorough germ-killing could later be accomplished in the car!

When it comes to young girls venturing alone into a public Ladies' restroom I believe that it's not appropriate until the age of seven years or so. By second grade the child should be, depending upon her maturity level, safety-conscious enough to efficiently go into the bathroom, get the job accomplished, wash her hands, and leave without talking to anyone. The father should remain directly outside the main door to the bathroom (whether it is in the restaurant, mall or movies) so there would be an immediate pick-up as she exits the restroom. Sound a bit paranoid and untrusting of the world? Yep...it is. But, when it comes to kids, safety is paramount.

Discipline in Public?

Call me crazy, but I *respect* seeing a parent disciplining a child in public, rather than ignoring the rude or inappropriate kid behavior. Watching a Mom or Dad placing a five-year-old in time-out in the department store (even if the kid is fussing or crying) warms my heart! This suggests parental guts as well as a determination to reinforce that consequences occur regardless of where the meltdown happens. Of course the discipline would be inappropriate at the table in the middle of the restaurant, especially if the kid is pulling the mother-of-all-meltdowns. He doesn't need the audience, and the rest of us really don't need to hear the wailing because he was denied dessert due to misbehavior at the table and Dad is sticking to his guns. Take the kid to the bathroom and stand him in the corner with your back to him. Or, leave the restaurant for a few minutes and put him in the car seat. Sit in the car but don't talk with him. Let him be bored, miss the fun at the table, and perhaps consider not throwing crackers at his brother the next time he's told to knock it off. The important thing is to reinforce that you will provide discipline even in public places. It's not only appropriate to do so, regardless of the age of the child, but *necessary* in your attempt to raise good kids. Older children can lose home privileges (electronics time, bed time) for acting up in public as well. Once your children accept that you will handle, not ignore, the situation you'll see better cooperation and compliance when in public.

Wear Makeup? Shave legs?

It's not unusual for girls in the fourth and fifth grades (10- and 11-year-olds) to show a distinct interest in wearing makeup and shaving their legs. Although most preschoolers love to play with Mom's makeup as a form of "dress up" or to pretend shave with an empty razor, many begin to seriously push for these privileges in the later grade school years. Most parents, though, believe that middle school is the proper time for these grown-up behaviors to begin to be allowed, and many dramas have resulted when the kid's desires conflict with the parent's expectations. My suggestion to clients is to try to reach a compromise, based upon the average age that other girls in your child's environment (school, church group, and neighborhood) are allowed to engage in these behaviors, your personal values and age when you first shaved or wore makeup to school, and the privileges allowed to your child's intimate group of friends. It's a tricky balance trying to allow your child to "fit in" with what her friends are allowed to do while at the same time staying within the boundaries of propriety. Personally I feel that shaving legs in fifth grade is reasonable, but be sure to warn your young lady that once she begins shaving it tends to be "forever". And, it hurts! Band-Aids on the knee are less than

attractive and she might wish to put this tedious chore off for several months or a year in order to avoid that inevitability. If you do allow the razor you may wish to purchase an electric model initially so that she doesn't look like a pin cushion. Show her how to do a good job and consider this a bonding opportunity if nothing else!

Wearing makeup is somewhat trickier, though. Tweens and young teens have the tendency to want to wear gobs of blue eye shadow and bright lipstick. My clients have had the best luck when they've taken their daughters (often with a friend and her mother) for an application at the makeup counter in a department store. Make an appointment for the girls and suggest to the sales person that the more "natural" the look, the better. Toned-down shades are most appropriate and often a barely colored lip gloss does the trick! Have the expert discuss the concept of "less is more" when it comes to makeup for young ladies, as well as the importance of keeping their skin clean and not sharing products with others for hygienic reasons. Colored lip gloss and light shades of lipstick are often acceptable in grade school (if this does not conflict with school policy), but eye shadow and mascara should be saved for the later middle or high school years. And, your child should have to pay for these products herself—take advantage of this as a teachable moment—that adult-like privileges (makeup) come with adult-like responsibilities (hitting her own piggy-bank).

Stay Home Alone?

Your child's individual level of maturity and responsibility play a large part in determining when they can be left alone at home, and for what amount of time. I've met ten-year-olds who are more responsible than their teen-age sibs, and are therefore safer bets to remain at home without parental supervision. In addition, your community will most likely have ordinances or policies about the minimum unattended age so you'll be wise to check on that.

In general, though, I believe that it's safe for an eight- or nine-year-old to be allowed home alone while you quickly run to the convenience store or to do a quick errand. That's assuming that you have your cell phone with you for emergency contact, that the child can be trusted to stay inside the home without answering the door or letting friends in, and that the telephone has caller ID so that it's answered only if he or she determines that it's a family member calling. Otherwise the call should be allowed to go to the answering machine without the child picking up.

Being home alone after school or during the summer for extended periods of time is a horse of a different color though. Consider setting up an arrangement with a neighbor to watch your kids as well as hers while you are at work, or to place your children in a day camp situation if this is possible. Unsupervised children tend to become bored when left alone, break house rules, leave the premises, let others in, or find their way onto the Internet when parents are not on patrol.

By the early teen years, though, many kids are responsible and mature enough to follow house rules and to be allowed to stay home alone after school or during the summer. But, know your individual child—impulsive kids often act before thinking and wind up in

trouble. If you're going to be worried while at work, it's just not worth it. Even though Junior might love the freedom and flexibility of having the house to himself, if you can't trust his judgment, don't do it. It's better to put up with some whining and complaining when you schedule him for yet another summer of day camps than to have to worry why he's not answering the phone and you can't leave work to check on him.

Be Unsupervised when Romance is in the Air?

It's best to discourage teens who are dating from being alone in your home, or at any other house, when a parent is not around. Most likely nothing will happen, but you certainly don't want your place to be used as a hotel! Begin talking with your children even before they reach the dating years about house rules and what they can expect. Let them know that an adult must be present when the "couple" are in your home, whether it's for a half-hour "studying" after school or hanging around the pool during the summer days. Don't buy the excuse that the parents of your daughter's boyfriend "won't mind." In fact, that's kind of scary if you think about it. They should be concerned about letting their teenage son spend unsupervised time at his girlfriend's house. Now, this doesn't mean that the kids are not allowed privacy. Sure they are, but let's keep it reasonable. Encourage watching movies in the living, family or media rooms and give them some privacy and space. If allowed in the bedroom the door stays open and the lights are on. You don't need to be bothering them every minute, but wandering by occasionally tends to keep things on the up-and up and discourages necking or other inappropriate behavior. If the relationship endures the kids may eventually engage in intimate activities of some sort, but you don't have to make it easy for them!