

**Your Child's "Firsts"**  
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*Today Contributor*

Change is scary, especially when it involves your children. There's a first time for just about everything, but as many seasoned parents will note, they wish that some of these "first times" could be postponed until a later date!

As children's bodies change and mature, hormones kick in, and social pressures abound our kids tend to have one thing in common—wanting to stretch the previously safe, agreed-upon boundaries and add all kinds of activities to their repertoire of desires and needs. Your fifth-grader probably loves to shop with you at the mall, but your sixteen-year-old would most likely prefer to go with her friends. Family movies were cool when your son was younger, but now as a ninth-grader he's pleading to be dropped off, of course without your scoping out the situation, and to link up with his buddies at the show.

What's a parent to do? Well, start with trying to be smart by picking your battles, listen to your child to understand where he or she is coming from, be ready to grow the rules with the kid, and know what your limits are and stick to them. Also, discuss with your child how trustworthiness and usage of common sense are extremely important attributes when considering the independence-seeking that he or she is engaged in. I've found with my own two kids, as well as with many of the families that I work with in my clinical practice, that compromise and consistency are key parental behaviors. Now, let's take a look at some of the most common, and perhaps anxiety-producing, *firsts* for our kids:

***Going to the mall or movies without you:***

Okay, your son or daughter has asked to go to either the mall or movies, and of course it's without you tagging along. Often children as young as 12 or 13 ask for this privilege as they see many of their peers dropped off and picked up by their folks without Mom or Dad participating. The primary focus should be upon safety. Face it, your kid really doesn't need you sitting next to him at the movies—you probably do though, as you may miss the bonding experience, actually want to see the show, or are afraid of either someone hurting your child or the kid leaving the movie to go off with his friends. Often parents feel better about the movie or mall trip with the group when these occur during the afternoon or early evening, and only allow night outings when the child is in high school.

When considering these outings, make sure that your kid is running with the pack when allowed at the movies or mall without you. There is safety in numbers but your child needs to promise (and stick to his word) to stay with the group and to not take off on his own to visit another store or to leave the movie theater. Trust is essential and if your kid has a history of impulsive or irresponsible behavior you may want to say no to such requests until he has proven himself to be dependable. If it makes you feel better, have

him or her carry a cell phone, with the rule that they must answer it when you call. And, be sure that he's aware of when and where he'll be picked up and stress that he needs to be on time so that you're not worried. If another parent is doing the driving double check that your child will be brought home at the expected time.

***Attending a boy-girl party:***

Although your daughter has probably attended many parties in her grade and early middle school years where boys were in attendance, it's a whole different animal when it comes to adolescent bashes. Often the party-giver's parents are either not at home or they've taken up residence in their bedroom to avoid the crowd. It's possible that someone will appear with beer or a bottle of liquor, or perhaps even marijuana. Kids who are driving cars come and go, and even with parents trying to supervise, things can quickly get out of hand when a bunch of kids get together on a Friday night. Now, this doesn't mean that your child will engage in any of this behavior, but it's a scary thought just knowing that she could be around other kids' misbehavior without your guidance.

First, let her know that her first co-ed party is a big responsibility for her, and possibly an anxiety-producing event for you. You don't want to make her feel guilty for attending, but some rules do have to be set in stone. Again, trust is critical. Mandate that she is not to engage in any substance use and must stay at the party and not leave the premises without your knowledge and permission. Make it clear that this is not open to debate. No chance, no way, nada. If she's not willing to agree to these bottom-line terms, or you can't trust her word, then she doesn't go. Also, it's imperative that you contact the parents to make sure that they will be on site and to find out how they plan to keep the kids inside and safe. If you don't feel comfortable with their answers, your child doesn't attend.

***Getting a cell phone:***

The age that a child receives their first cell phone depends upon the parents' needs, the individual child's wishes as well as their maturity and responsibility. The ten-year-old with good judgment may very well enjoy having a cell phone to use to call home while at their buddy's house and to occasionally chat with friends, but in an appropriate manner. An immature, irresponsible twelve-year-old may not be ready for their own phone—either misplacing it frequently, lending it to friends, going above the allotted number of minutes or making inappropriate calls (in school, gossiping about others). Kids who are not mature enough to have their own phones should not have them—they can borrow Mom or Dad's phone for select usage when it's helpful for the parent to keep in touch. And, please let your pre-teen and teens know that you'll only be paying "so much" for the phone, if they just have to have the latest and greatest, then the bucks come from their piggy bank, not yours. And, although cell phones tend to be fashion statements, try to keep it in perspective. Does your thirteen-year-old daughter really need one adorned with rhinestones? Probably not, and it may not sit well with her friends' parents who may consider it excessive and indicative of entitlement.

I like to view the cell phone as an electronic leash of sorts. It's a great way to keep communication easy and open between kids on the go and their folks, and leaves no excuse for not getting parental permission if the evening's plans need to change. If your child does not have their own phone, you may wish to consider lending them yours for evenings out. But, there need to be clear rules about the care and usage of the cell phone. The issues to be considered are whether the phone is to be used solely to call home or whether your son or daughter can use it to communicate with friends, who will pay for excess usage (a good way to spend baby sitting money!), and whether or not it can be turned off, lent to friends or taken to school. If your teen has their own phone but tends to rack up the minutes, consider purchasing a pre-paid plan with a reasonable monthly fee for a set amount of minutes. Kids get real good, real quick when it comes to rationing out chat time when they know that the meter is running! Cell phones are privileges, making everyone's life a bit easier. But, they can be suspended or removed if behavior is inappropriate.

There are two things to note when considering giving your child permission to have a cell phone. First, the main reasons for letting your child use a cell phone are *safety* (ability to call home when frightened, missed the bus to school, feeling uncomfortable with what friends are doing), as well as ease of communication between child and parent. Notice that I didn't mention fun and communication between your child and her buddies. Sure, that's paramount on her mind, and it's cool to have your own latest and great technology to be able to text message and take photos. But, primarily the child's cell phone usage should help you, as the parent, keep better tabs on the kid as well as to keep you in the driver's seat when it comes to knowing where she is. Secondly, all kids who use cell phones need to be aware of the potential dangers involved. As technology expands so do the possibilities for misuse. This may take the form of someone else hacking into your child's system (she is on a "wireless" technology), a friend "borrowing" and misusing the phone to make indiscreet calls, or downloading expensive and/or inappropriate material (ring tones, pornographic materials, etc.). So, to be a better-prepared parent, all kids (just getting their first cell phone as well as those who are pro's at using them) should read about the dangers and rules of usage on an appropriate website such as:

[www.att.com/smartlimits](http://www.att.com/smartlimits)

<http://www.verizonwireless.com/b2c/splash/chaperone/splash.jsp>

<http://support.t-mobile.com/knowledge/root/public/tm23351.htm#top>

In addition, folks can learn from these sites what parental controls are free, available, and easy to install. I suggest using a cell carrier that offers "tamper block" features. This allows the parent to block select incoming or outgoing calls to that phone, install "quiet time" so that calls after a certain time of night do not ring but messages go directly through to voice mail, and that the phone can be turned off during school hours if the parent deems that to be appropriate. And, with the tamper block feature, the parent holds the pin code so the child cannot change the settings. Pretty neat, huh?

### *Getting to drive:*

Taking the car out for a spin alone usually ranks high on teens' wish list of firsts. It's almost a rite of passage--getting the restricted license, then the driver's license, and finally the day arrives when you let your daughter take the car to the convenience store all by herself. I can remember when my children began to drive, they seemed to have a newfound need for quick trips to the store to grab some binders for school, to visit a friend that just couldn't wait until school the next day, or an offer to pick up fast food or *anything* that we needed at home. After the novelty of driving wore off, though, it seemed like pulling teeth from a chicken to blast them out the door to run some errands!

Hopefully your child has logged many, many hours of driving with you, perhaps completed a driver's education course at school or taken private lessons. Nothing, and I repeat nothing, is as frightening as putting a 16- or 17-year-old behind the wheel, alone, for the first time. How can you make it more comfortable for everyone? Begin by taking baby steps and setting limits. Allow the teen to drive only during daylight hours initially, and then only after you feel that they have had sufficient experience will you let them drive in the evening. Check your community's teen driving curfews carefully—most allow them to drive alone during the first year until 11 PM or so. Also, restrict the number of people that they can have in the car. Initially you may want to make the rule that they must drive alone so as not to be distracted, and can pick up friends only after they've had sufficient experience. Continue to ride, as a passenger, with your teen to evaluate if they tend to tail-gate, speed or are inattentive to the rules of the road. You should request that cell phone usage not be allowed at first, and you may even want the radio turned off to lessen distractions. Trust me, they'll agree to anything, at first, if it means that they can get behind the wheel of a car! And, you also may want them to check out the American Auto Association's website ([www.AAA.com](http://www.AAA.com)) –its chock full of suggestions for teen drivers and safety.

To help determine if your child is ready to begin driving, consider these issues:

- The child had to be showing adequate initiative, judgment and responsibility in major life areas in order to take the learner's permit examination. This includes working to their potential in school, *general* politeness (let's not get too carried away here!), *none* or very few behavioral problems at school, and a history of using decent age-appropriate judgment and honesty. Impulsivity, sneakiness and lying negate any discussion of attaining driving privileges. In other words, if you couldn't trust their behavior in your home, how are they to be trusted behind the wheel of a car?
- Agreement to engage in either a school-based driver's education class or one obtained privately. Since I'm a bit on the "you can never be too careful side", my own kids took the school-based *and* the private driving courses. And, they had to chip in some cold cash to help defer the cost of the private lessons. (This also seemed to motivate their attention to Mario, the driving teacher, as their money was involved in his payment.)

- Agreement that plenty of practice driving was necessary within the year between receiving the learner's permit and earning the actual license, and that an adequate level of driving skill, knowledge and reflexes would be necessary.
- Realization that just because the above conditions were met, that continued good judgment, grades and decent behavior would be necessary to be granted the privilege of taking the actual driving exam, leading to the "real license".
- Understanding that earning a license in no way would mean instant access to a car. Begin by allowing each child to drive your car after school to run short errands, and gradually lengthen the amount of time as your comfort level increases. Every state has clear times of day and/or night, as well as curfews, when teens of varying ages are allowed to drive. In addition, teens in certain states have to be students enrolled in school as well as having achieved a certain grade point average to even apply for the license if under the age of 18 years.
- Acceptance of your driving rules: no friends in the car for the first two months. None, nada, don't even think about it. Following that time period a friend may be allowed to drive with your child but you would need to be told who was going to be picked up, where they were going and would expect a phone call when they arrived. Cell phone usage while driving, although legal in many states, should be nixed except to call home or to answer your calls to them. If any fudging occurs (child is supposed to be at friend's house but they were actually cruising the beach) then driving privileges would be curtailed.
- Any usage of substances (liquor, marijuana, or other drugs) while driving *or at any other time* means loss of the driver's license. **The car is a huge responsibility and a privilege...it is also a weapon when poor judgment, distraction by friends and loud music, or usage of substances are in the picture or in their lives.**
- Recognition that they will be expected to contribute a reasonable amount of money toward insurance payments. The amount would vary with the school and work load, but part of this responsibility would be on their shoulders.
- Having free access to their own car is not a given. This will depend upon family finances, the teen's needs and whether they basically deserved one or not. An additional car in the family is a huge expense that is not to be taken lightly. Too many kids expect, and receive, a vehicle on their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday as if it is a rite of passage. It's not...it is to be earned by doing a good job during adolescence. That includes working hard at school, at a part-time job after school or on the weekends, involvement in clubs or sports, and showing a general respect for the family as a unit.

### ***Getting to 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 legal unattended age so you'll be wise to check on that.*

In general, though, I believe that it can be safe for an eight- or nine-year-old to be allowed home alone while you quickly run to the convenience store (10 to 15 minutes or so) 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.

***Getting to wear makeup or shaving 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).

***Being allowed to date:***

Okay, here's the biggie—your child's first emotional relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Although grade-schoolers often tease about having a boyfriend or girlfriend, kids as young as middle-school can develop very strong, loving feelings for another. Even though you, as the parent, suspect that this infatuation will only last for a few weeks, remember that to your child this relationship is going to last forever. Respect privacy on phone calls to a reasonable degree, and be sure to monitor activities. Especially with high-schoolers it's important to set up house rules such as "no visitors in the house unless an adult is present and if the boyfriend or girlfriend is visiting the kids must stay in a common area." I would discourage allowing them to visit in the bedroom, even with the door open.

I've always felt that it's better, safer and wiser to begin boy-girl activities in supervised groups. Both genders can have lots of fun at your home or a trusted friend's house, and the adults can relax knowing that the kids are being supervised. Grade schoolers should not be allowed on dates—they are just too young, immature and have no business playing teenager. In 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, though, many kids are allowed in groups of four (two boys, two girls) to go to movies or the mall, or to play games at the local arcade. If your child suggests this, it's best if you can be in attendance (although sitting at the rear of the theater or walking in the mall but discreetly checking out your favorite shops). I would continue to discourage anything but group dates at this age. When the kid hits high school, the rules seem to change. Ninth and tenth graders still go in groups, mainly because they need a parent to drive to the destination or an older sib or friend will be doing the transporting. However, at about age 16, most kids are ready to begin some two-person dating activities. It's the wise parent who keeps the lines of communication comfortable and open, so that your son or daughter can come to you with concerns about their boyfriend or girlfriend's behavior or desires.

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!

If the relationship progresses, realize that there's a fine line between showing interest in your child's object of affection and stepping over the boundaries and snooping. Trust me; your kid will let you know if you've become too nosy! Most of all get to know the other parents in order to establish a consistent line of communication so that the young couple has similar relationship rules at both homes. And, keep in mind that if you are not totally fond of your child's friend don't be overly critical. Most likely the relationship will not last long and you don't want to be unreasonable or judgmental.

But, hand-in-hand with teen love comes teen heartbreak. Often the breakup is just a blip on the screen as your son or daughter moves on to their next interest, be it a sport activity, vacation, new friend or even a new "love". However, if this was the big one and her heart is really broken, be there for her. Listen, listen and listen some more. Try not to be judgmental by criticizing her ex. Remember, breakups are often tumultuous, moody times for youngsters and just as you've agreed that he's a real jerk, your kid may begin to like him again or to take offense at your criticism.

Expect your child to be moody, in need of desperately talking with her girlfriends on the phone or instant messaging others on the Internet. These are activities that can help her to begin to resolve her feelings, to get over the hurt, and to put feelings of rejection into better perspective. Try not to band-aid the situation by expecting an instant fix. Broken teen hearts often take a while to mend. You may want to consider trying to keep your child busy with interesting activities or functions if she seems inclined. Watch out for signs of depression (changes in eating, sleeping, studying habits) that continue for more than a few weeks. And, expect and respect her moodiness, letting her know that you understand her hurt but that you expect her to treat the rest of the family in a civil manner while the crisis resolves.

*Getting ears pierced:*

In my experience, I see three main times in children's lives when ear piercing occurs. Often, baby girls have their ears pierced as newborns, which is obviously the parents' desire and not the child's wish. Then, as early grade-schoolers, piercing-envy tends to occur as those without earrings want to fit in with the crowd of those who sport all kinds of cool stones and designs daily in the school setting. Then the trend seems to hit again in middle school when almost all kids are looking at each other and trying to either be clones or opposites. The desire to have pierced ears is very common with girls throughout these stages and I see no reason not to consider their request as long as you follow these guidelines:

- Having ears pierced is a privilege. Is your child doing her job in school and generally behaving at home?
- Will your kid be responsible enough, especially during the first 2 to 3 weeks following the piercing, to clean the site as well as to rotate the earrings so that infection doesn't occur.
- Your child realizes that even under the best of circumstances that ear piercing is painful, and that she may decide to stop after the first one is done and she's had to endure the pain for nothing.
- Check to make sure that at least other girls in her grade and friendship groups have pierced ears. Most likely they do, but you don't want your child to be the odd one out and perhaps appear to be inappropriate to others.

Now, how about your son asking for a pierced ear or two? Well, about ten years ago I would have responded with a definite "no" to that request. However, having one ear pierced is not unusual for teenage boys. I would definitely say no for a grade schooler, and probably no for a middle schooler. Why? Well, it's still somewhat unusual for those ages and I believe that it may reflect poorly on the kid and his family. Face it, folks take looks at face value, literally, and teachers, administrators and other parents may assume that your child is impulsive, a risk-taker and a follower if allowed to pierce his ears. They may also assume that his parents are uninvolved and do not provide adequate guidance for their child. In high school, however, many boys do sport a pierced ear or two, but I would try to have the child wait and reconsider before putting a hole in his body. Ask him to talk with you about it again in 3 or 4 weeks—this buys him time to forget the issue if it's primarily impulse-driven, as well as your gathering information and time to calmly access his request.