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Milestones: what is the 'right' age for kids to travel alone, surf the web, learn about war?

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Milestones: what is the 'right' age for kids to travel alone, surf the web, learn about war?

Abstract

Being a parent presents some problems. Irrespective of what you want, your children are going to take actions or be exposed to things that you may not relish. There is the ever-present possibility that they will experience things that you want to actively protect them from. The web provides some salient examples, like pornography. I really don't want my eight-year-old seeing pornography. However, when my eight-year-old asks me an important Dungeons & Dragons question like, "Dad, can a paladin do magic and wear armour?" or he wants to know how solar panels operate, I always encourage him to look on the web. I've taught him to search on Google, to follow his curiosity, and I sometimes do it with him. Ultimately, I want him to be able to seek answers to the questions that are interesting to him independently. He is guaranteed to run into something dodgy on the web and my wife and I can take ordinary precautions. To our way of thinking, however, more extreme precautions - prohibiting unsupervised internet use and high level parental control - start to present their own risks. One might ask, at what age should I allow my child to use the web unsupervised?

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Milestones: what is the 'right' age for kids to travel alone, surf the web, learn about war?

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At what age should I let my kids get to school on their own?
Age-appropriate milestones vary for all children, but there are
some important things to think about... Flickr/Hector De
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Being a parent presents some problems. Irrespective of what you want, your children are going to take actions or be exposed to things that you may not relish. There is the ever-present possibility that they will experience things that you want to actively protect them from. The web provides some salient examples, like pornography. I really don't want my eight-year-old seeing pornography.

However, when my eight-year-old asks me an important Dungeons & Dragons question like, "Dad, can a paladin do magic and wear armour?" or he wants to know how solar panels operate, I always encourage him to look on the web. I've taught him to search on Google, to follow his curiosity, and I sometimes do it with him.

Ultimately, I want him to be able to seek answers to the questions that are interesting to him independently. He is guaranteed to run into something dodgy on the web and my wife and I can take ordinary precautions.

To our way of thinking, however, more extreme precautions – prohibiting unsupervised internet use and high level parental control – start to present their own risks.

One might ask, at what age should I allow my child to use the web unsupervised?

From the perspective of developmental and educational psychology, this is a slightly odd question. Let me explain. Most parents are familiar with the idea that certain developmental achievements happen at specific ages. Thus, infants become more wary of strangers at about nine months of age (stranger wariness) and they start to point communicatively by about 12 months of age (declarative pointing). These kinds of developments in the child's capacity are to be expected in all children given a typical environment; we call them developmental milestones.

But at what age should a child ride a bike? At what age should a child go to the shops alone, or stay at home alone? When should we start to talk to children/adolescents about their emerging sexuality? And when do we tell them about the Holocaust? These questions don't have simple answers. This is where the complex issue of bringing up a child becomes ... well, complex.



At what age can a child independently surf the web?

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To put it bluntly, there is no riding-a-bicycle developmental milestone.

Some people don't ride bikes, others start when they are two years old, like the Dutch. Strange though it may sound, as well as being a physical accomplishment, riding a bicycle is also a cultural accomplishment (again, think of the Dutch).

Recently, a great deal has been learnt about the ways in which children acquire cultural knowledge. Riding a bicycle illustrates some of these principles. First, children see others riding a bike and that may motivate them to imitate the behaviour. In early social learning theories this was a process called modelling, the process of learning a behaviour via observation.

But imitation is potentially more than just modeling; it seems that human children are highly motivated to copy others' behaviour especially when demonstrators are providing signals that this is how you do something; human infants and children seem to understand that sometimes information or skills are being conveyed, and this requires a different kind of learning. Second, riding a bike is a highly scaffolded experience, as any parent will attest, you have to provide a bike, encouragement, training wheels, and so on.

Largely physical accomplishments like bike riding don't do justice to the transmission of cultural knowledge. When we are raising our children we know there are all sorts of things they cannot do that they will ultimately have to do, and we know that there are all sorts of things they don't understand that they will have to understand.

We often drive a wedge between skills and understanding, between action and thought, but the falseness of this is quickly evident. I spoke recently to a friend who wanted her ten-year-old daughter to be able to get to school, in the city, on public transport from the inner-west by herself. This particular young girl is very intelligent and responsible, I'm sure that she could have gotten herself to school at seven years of age. But there is no way her parents would have felt comfortable about that.

Why? For her parents to give her the independence to travel to school alone they need to be satisfied not just that she can present her ticket, change trains and get on the right bus, they



The age at which learning about sensitive topics like war and watching the news can vary from child to child Flickr/Sarah Horrigan, CC BY

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providing useful information; actually, these two things are not unconnected. Between early childhood and mid-adolescence children have to understand all sort of things for which they need information from people they trust.

The information we convey to our children, and the manner in which we do it, helps prepare them for life. For most things, like knowledge about their bodies and sexuality, there is no particular moment at which children are ready for specific knowledge or experience, and much of this we can't control anyway.

But what we can do is answer their questions honestly in a manner that is appropriate for their age, and conveys our values. The risks of overprotection are simple: children will grow up anyway but they won't have access to good information from people that they trust.

So what age is a good age?

It is very difficult to put an age on when a child should or shouldn't be able to grasp a new domain of independence. Your decisions will depend on specific circumstances; in some neighbourhoods you might be comfortable sending your child to the shops alone at ten years, in others you may wait until they are 14. Traffic is also a big issue. Managing risk is critical.

The web provides a salient example. By year five or six today's children should have some freedom to search for the information they need independently. They can do this in a family space rather than in their bedroom. Talk to them honestly about the unsavoury content on the web, this will give them a framework for managing troubling or embarrassing content with you.

Independent action is also very important for children. Think back to your own childhood, there is a good chance that some of your fondest memories don't involve adults. Sometimes, children can walk to the shops before they are 12 years old, and around this time they should be able to stay in the house for a little while as well.

The law on leaving children

need to be confident that she understands the importance of staying on the path, like Little Red Riding Hood.

This understanding is largely derived from countless conversations in which the parents have been able to convey important information about the world and the risks it presents to their daughter.

We know that children seek information from the people they trust, and from people who have a good record at



How old is too young to ride a bike? Flickr/Travis Swan, CC BY

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alone isn't simple, and this is a good thing too because it tacitly recognises that there is no age at which it becomes appropriate to leave your child alone. Six is too young, 16 is too old. By 11 years you should be thinking about it.

Watching the news is an interesting challenge. Children need to make sense of what they see, and that isn't always simple because it involves an understanding of society, history, and human behaviour. I introduced my own children to upsetting ideas in a staggered way. A visit to the war memorial with my six- and eight-year-old was very important. We were able to speak about war and death in the context of remembrance, and that felt good.

Now, two years later, when I watch the news with my ten-year-old, she already has a psychological framework to understand war and the tragedy it brings. One or two news items are enough though, and they usually involve a history lesson or a discussion of human behaviour. I would hope to watch the news or read the newspaper more often with my daughter by the time she is in year seven, and certainly on a regular basis by year nine.

Independence is linked to responsibility and much can be done to build responsibility in children before they undertake fully independent actions. But when you give your children independence you provide them with evidence that you trust them, and that trust fortifies responsibility in a way that supervised activity cannot.