

Backdated Teen Freedom



“Give me my freedom and backdate it, please.”

Emily shares how, as lockdown eases, her teenager’s expectations of freedom have increased.

When the pandemic struck my daughter had just turned 12. Her battles for freedom at half way through Year Seven had consisted of wanting more than an hour on tech and wanting to go it alone for a ten minute weekly walk from school down the High Road to her netball club. She was, to all intents and purposes, a little girl on the brink of pushing boundaries but had only just noticed the door.

Recently, as she settled down at dinner with a very serious face, she pointed out that she was now nearly 14 (hmm, more like 13 ½ but we let it slip). This, she said, meant that when lockdown finally eased up, she would need to have a significantly increased amount of freedom commensurate with her new age.

Backdate My Freedom

“I cannot be expected to go back to the level that I was at when I was 12,” she argued earnestly, “I’m now nearly 14 and I’m going to need more.” she stated matter-of-factly.

I must confess this had not occurred to me at all. As soon as she said it, my heart raced with fear at the thought of my little girl – grown so content in her safe but life-limiting lockdown cocoon - finally being released and spreading her wings. But I realised she did have a point.

I asked her what she was hoping for and what her expectations of post-lockdown freedoms were. Suddenly, I found myself talking to her about travelling into London by herself, cycling solo to school, being allowed to go to friends' houses at night and having a late curfew, going to the local shopping mall alone and all sorts of other friend and shopping-related activities.

Some of them, I thought, sounded reasonable, others, more risky. We have, for example, a local bus route that feels safe and one that feels dodgy, where passengers are always kicking off. As we talked and discussed the relative merits or risks of each request, I realised the following:

Realisations

I feel rather like a diver coming back up from deep water. I am going to need her help to get back up to post-lockdown speed without getting the bends. She's going to need to acclimatise me to these new found freedoms by helping with things like communication and trust. A fast-track to trust is hard to build, but together we would need to hold each other's hands to ensure her safe transition and my peace of mind.

Over the various lockdowns, we've learned to trust my daughter with tech. Like most other kids, her usage has gone through the roof, but she's been great about the other boundaries we've set like keeping tech downstairs or not communicating with strangers. She's slowly learned the risks and we've helped her negotiate these step by step over a significant time period. In short, on both sides, the learning curve has been gradual.

Coming back out into the world, the learning curve is going to be steep. She's missed out on the zone of proximal development where little steps become natural building blocks on top of each other. The gradual learning that should've been taking place over the last year and a half has been missed – including her ability to deal with unexpected, uncomfortable or unsafe situations.

We need to help her catch up on that front, so that when she's enjoying her new found freedom she's doing it with the right munition to deal with whatever circumstances are presented to her – whether that's getting lost on the tube, being approached by a stranger or getting a cycle puncture halfway home.

The over-riding issue is how to fast-track the awareness and preparedness so that she can enjoy her new freedoms in safety. While I'm pretty sure there is no magic-wand answer, the one conclusion my daughter and I came to was that she would allow me to voice my fears, concerns and advice once before each new activity, enabling me to 'get it all out there, mum' and feel I had given her all the pre-emptive warnings and danger points, but then I needed to let her fly.

Scary times for sure, but also exciting. The look on her face as she realised I wanted her to embrace her right-of-passage freedoms was one I won't forget. At the end of a very long and difficult tunnel, there was hope at last.

