

## What to stop doing as child grows



### Stop doing everything for them

In infancy and early toddlerhood, children depend on adults for nearly everything: feeding, safety, soothing, sleep routines, hygiene, mobility, and emotional regulation. But as children grow, continuing to do every task for them can unintentionally reduce opportunities to build executive function, motor planning, frustration tolerance, and self-efficacy.

Executive function includes skills such as working memory, inhibitory control, planning, flexible thinking, and task initiation. These skills mature gradually through childhood and adolescence. They do not develop simply because adults give lectures; they develop through repeated, supported practice.

Instead of tying every shoe, packing every bag, answering every question, or rescuing every forgotten item, consider a gradual transfer of responsibility. For example, a preschooler can put laundry in a basket, a school-age child can help prepare a backpack, and a teenager can learn to manage appointments with adult backup. The parent's role shifts from performer to coach.

Replace "I'll do it" with "Let's do the first step together."

Replace "You should know this by now" with "What part is getting stuck?"

Replace perfection standards with practice standards.

### **Stop expecting adult-level self-control**

Children can become more capable without becoming neurologically adult. The prefrontal cortex, limbic circuitry, sleep regulation, and stress-response systems continue to mature across childhood and adolescence. A child who can reason calmly at 10 a.m. may lose that capacity when hungry, overstimulated, embarrassed, or exhausted.

One common parenting trap is to stop offering co-regulation too early. Co-regulation means an adult helps a child return to a manageable physiological and emotional state through calm presence, predictable limits, reduced stimulation, and language that organizes the moment. This is different from giving in. It is the biological bridge toward self-regulation.

As children grow, stop interpreting every meltdown, defiant reply, or shutdown as deliberate disrespect. Behavior can reflect stress physiology, immature impulse control, sensory overload, anxiety, sleep deprivation, family strain, or unmet skill needs. This does not mean there should be no consequences. It means consequences work best when paired with skill-building and repair.

A useful question is: "What skill does my child need in order to handle this better next time?" That question often leads to better outcomes than "How do I make them feel bad enough not to repeat it?"

### **Stop using fear, shame, or chronic stress as discipline**

Strong boundaries are healthy. Chronic fear is not. Research syntheses on child development describe how persistent stress and adversity can disrupt developing brain circuitry, attention, self-regulation, learning, and long-term health. Children can tolerate ordinary frustration, disappointment, and consequences when they are embedded in stable, responsive relationships. The concern is repeated, intense, unpredictable, or humiliating stress without adequate buffering support.

As your child grows, it is worth reducing discipline patterns that depend on yelling, threats, ridicule, comparison, withdrawal of affection, or public

embarrassment. These may produce short-term compliance, but they can also increase defensiveness, secrecy, aggression, anxiety, or avoidance.

More developmentally supportive discipline usually includes clear expectations, immediate and proportionate consequences, calm follow-through, and later repair. Repair after conflict does not erase a boundary. It teaches accountability: "I was too harsh in how I spoke. The rule still stands, and I want us to try again."

Stop asking, "How do I control this child?"

Start asking, "How do I reduce chaos while teaching the missing skill?"

Stop making your child's nervous system the battleground for every problem.

### **Stop overprotecting them from all discomfort**

Many parents step in because they love their child and can see the hard part coming: the lost toy, the awkward conversation, the failed quiz, the conflict with a friend, the disappointment of not being chosen. But if adults remove every discomfort, children may have fewer chances to practice coping, problem-solving, persistence, and repair.

Healthy growth requires supported risk, not reckless exposure. A child can be allowed to climb slightly higher at the playground while an adult stays nearby. A school-age child can speak to a teacher about a missing assignment after rehearsing what to say. A teenager can learn to manage money, transportation planning, or time management with scaffolding rather than surveillance.

The key is to distinguish danger from discomfort. Danger requires adult protection. Discomfort often requires adult support while the child participates in the solution. This approach helps children internalize the message: "Hard things are manageable, and I am not alone."

### **Stop letting screens fill every gap**

Digital media is part of modern childhood, but it can crowd out sleep, physical activity, face-to-face interaction, imaginative play, reading, and family conversation. Guidance from pediatric health sources emphasizes age-appropriate screen boundaries: avoiding media for children under 18 months except video

chatting, choosing high-quality programming for young children, limiting passive viewing, and keeping screens away from bedtime and bedrooms.

As children grow, parents often shift from simple time limits to media literacy. Still, some habits are worth stopping across ages: background television during meals or homework, violent or fast-paced content for young children, unstructured scrolling late at night, and using screens as the only emotional regulation tool.

Instead of framing screen changes as punishment, frame them as health architecture. Sleep hygiene, attention, mood regulation, and family connection all improve when digital boundaries are predictable. Consider device-free meals, charging devices outside bedrooms, co-viewing younger children's media, and discussing algorithms, advertising, privacy, and online social pressure with older children.

### **Stop confusing privacy with secrecy**

Young children need close supervision because they lack mature risk appraisal. Older children and teenagers need increasing privacy because identity formation, bodily autonomy, peer relationships, and independent judgment are developing. The task is to maintain safety without communicating constant suspicion.

Stop entering every room, reading every message, or interrogating every mood by default unless there is a serious safety concern. At the same time, do not abandon monitoring altogether. Adolescents still benefit from parents knowing where they are, who they are with, how they will get home, and what the family safety rules are.

A balanced approach might sound like: "I respect your privacy. My job is still to keep you safe. If I become worried about safety, we will talk about what level of monitoring is needed and why." This kind of transparency is more likely to preserve trust than covert surveillance as a routine habit.

### **Stop speaking for them in every situation**

Advocacy is essential when children are very young, medically vulnerable,

bullied, discriminated against, or unable to represent their needs. But as children grow, always speaking for them can delay communication skills and self-advocacy.

During healthcare visits, school meetings, or social situations, invite your child to participate at a developmentally appropriate level. A school-age child can describe symptoms in their own words. A teenager can ask questions about sleep, nutrition, menstrual health, sports injuries, medication safety, or mental health with a clinician present. Parents can still provide context and ensure accuracy.

This gradual handoff supports health literacy and autonomy. It also teaches children that their body and experiences matter. For medical concerns, parents should not force independence before the child is ready, but they can create safe practice opportunities with pediatricians, therapists, school nurses, or other qualified professionals.

### **Stop ignoring your own stress response**

Caregiver stress is not a character flaw; it is a physiological and social reality. Work pressure, financial strain, sleep loss, relationship conflict, health concerns, and lack of support can all increase parental reactivity. Children are sensitive to the emotional climate around them, especially when stress becomes chronic, unpredictable, or frightening.

One of the most powerful things to stop doing as a child grows is pretending that parental regulation does not matter. A parent who pauses, lowers their voice, takes a brief break, apologizes after overreacting, or seeks support is modeling nervous-system recovery and accountability.

If anger feels difficult to control, if conflict becomes frightening, if you worry you might hurt your child, or if stress is impairing daily functioning, seek professional parenting support promptly. Contact a healthcare professional, mental health clinician, trusted pediatrician, local crisis line, or emergency services if there is immediate danger. Getting help is a protective action, not a parenting failure.