

## On the Corner

By Robert Docter –

It seems to me that one of the greatest gifts a parent can give a child is the gift of *freedom*...but...as is always the case, timing is everything.

Freedom is not something which is granted on a one shot basis. It is the product of decades of caring, loving, and relating which begins at emergence from the womb and never ends.

Moses wanted to give the children of Israel freedom, so he led them from bondage in Egypt and soon discovered that “a nation of slaves is strange to the meaning of liberty.” He needed a set of specific rules to help them learn how to be free and responsible at the same time. God provided the rules.



As the new infant is held close in a mother’s arms, the new human begins immediately to establish certain understandings about his world, his caregivers, himself. He decides quickly whether or not he can take the risk to trust those around him. If he determines he can’t, sometimes he blames himself. The first warping of his personality begins and skews the way he relates and behaves from then on.

If he learns to trust, he opens himself to his world and begins its exploration. If he is allowed to explore and suffer the consequences of *safe mistakes*, he grows. Pre-adolescent children need specific rules, but they also need to understand *why* the rule exists.

Some parents want to protect their children even from safe mistakes. When this happens, the child learns that he is unable to make decisions on his own. He concludes that he continually needs to be directed from outside himself. He becomes even more bent. If he is allowed to discover the consequences of his actions, he knows he is loved and trusted. He moves from specific rules to essential *principles* of behavior. He gains confidence in his ability and grows. When he has internalized the essential principles based on the positive values of our culture, he moves toward freedom.

This is a risky place for parents. Considerable self doubt raises its ugly head. In their fear and doubt, some parents seek to withhold the freedom—to limit experiences—to continue to control this young person’s life. The communication of parents at this stage must move from rule statements to

questions.

“What are your goals—what do you want to accomplish?”

“What choices do you have?”

“What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?”

“What do you think is your best course of action?”

Some youngsters will simply say “I don’t know” to every question. They feel insecure about their abilities to decide. Good parents avoid directing them, but instead, help them examine what is before them while dishing great bowls of confidence. We do not provide a gift of freedom by burdening our children with the lifelong echo of our voice reminding them of our lengthy lists of “shoulds” and “musts” and “gottas.” This is not freedom. It’s a guilt-ridden sentence of permanent servitude.

Wise values are products of healthy self-worth.

God is our father, too.

He treats us as a good parent—beginning with rules, allowing safe mistakes, providing never-ending love, always forgiving, trusting his children to be fully themselves and to love him. He grants us freedom to relate to him or ignore him. This is how he related to Jesus. While he could have dispatched him to earth in any of a number of ways, he chose to introduce him as an infant—fully human—who lived and grew among us.

Freedom requires a lifetime of learning and teaching. It is never seized, only accepted, and the only thing a good parent wants is a peer relationship.