



DIFFICULT CALL: Deciding when to let children start riding the subway on their own is one of the more vexing dilemmas facing parents in the city.

Hitting the streets

No set rules for kids traveling alone; mistakes happen

BY MATTHEW FLAMM

NEW YORKERS MAY PRIDE THEMSELVES on how savvy and street-smart they are in the worlds of business and commerce. But when it comes to letting their children walk out the door unsupervised, they can be among the most nervous people on earth.

Just ask a kid what it's like to try to win freedom to roam.

"It's probably reasonable for parents to worry," says Tim Rossi, 14, a downtown native who has spent the last two years extending the boundaries of where he can go by himself. "But there has to be some sort of compromise."

Deciding when to allow children to start walking to school or riding the subway—or staying out until midnight—on their own is among the more vexing everyday dilemmas facing parents in the city. Terrorist threats and news reports of child abductions ratchet up the anxiety even further, despite New York's continuing record as a safe city.

Parents are keenly aware that no city will ever be completely safe. And

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SAFER CITY

Decline in robberies.

100,280

1990

23,536

2006

-76.5%

TOTAL DECLINE

Source: NYC Police Department

No set rules for traveling alone

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no matter how much advice they get, they have to feel their way through a parenting thicket where there are no fixed signposts.

"It's been very gradual," says Tim's mother, Anne Rossi, who works at a photography agency, about expanding her son's roaming rights. Currently, Tim is limited to the lower half of Manhattan. For trips uptown and to other boroughs, he has to travel with friends. "It's been about finding his comfort level and my comfort level," she adds.

Sixth grade a turning point

PARENTING EXPERTS emphasize that no two children are alike, though sixth grade tends to be the year most families feel comfortable letting their children travel alone to school.

Parents also have to realize that their children are often more capable of doing things on their own than they appear.

Laura Dupouy, an interior designer on the Upper West Side, has been negotiating these issues with her 10-year-old son, Quentin, who wants to walk the 10 blocks to school by himself.

Ms. Dupouy isn't quite ready for that step. But New York children,

GIVING UP CONTROL

GET READY. "Fourth grade is when kids start pushing to do things on their own," says Lisa Spiegel, director of Soho Parenting. "Let them take independent steps, like going into a store when you're nearby."

GET SET. With middle school, children start traveling to school on their own, and ranging farther around the city. "Teach them how to read a subway map and about safety," Ms. Spiegel says. Cell phones come in handy now.

GO. When high school starts, curfews need to be set, both for after-school and for evenings out with friends.

RELAX. By senior year, they're on their own. "The amount of control you're going to have is limited," says Lawrence Balter, a psychology professor at New York University.

GOOD LUCK!

unlike their suburban counterparts, have a wealth of opportunities to choose from when it comes to traveling on their own. So she's letting Quentin go to the nearby deli by himself and walk their dog in the neighborhood after school.

"One of the good things about giving kids independence is that they're usually much more careful when they're on their own," Ms. Dupouy says.

self, the 12-year-old forgot to bring the money they'd left him. "One thing we're trying to pound into his head is that when you're out in the world, there are keys, money and phones," says Mr. Dobens, a vice president at real estate firm Prudential Douglas Elliman. "But he's not going to do everything perfectly."

Real troubles begin

WHAT'S MORE, letting children go free is just the beginning. As soon as they're traveling by themselves, the real teenage troubles begin.

After-school curfews need to be set, and children should be in regular touch by cell phone, parenting experts say. At the same time, when nighttime visits are involved, cell phones aren't enough.

"They need to call you from a land line," insists Lisa Spiegel, director of Soho Parenting, a family counseling service in Manhattan. "Most kids are going to try to get away with stuff, and you need to show them you've been there, done that."

Parents say it's also a good idea to talk to other families about curfews, especially if a sleepover is involved, so there's agreement about how late everyone is allowed out. And while not all parents insist their child call them on a land line, many agree that it doesn't hurt to be suspicious.

"When my daughter kisses me goodnight at 1 a.m., I inhale deeply

just to smell her," says Janet Markoff, a managing director at search firm Major Lindsey & Africa, and mother of 17-year-old Lily. "She knows what that's about, but I still do it."

New York parents do sleep easier on one count: Their teenagers, unlike their suburban counterparts, aren't old enough to drive home from parties at night.

But there are hazards to city living, and curfews, keeping in touch and traveling with friends can only offer so much protection. Recently, Tim Rossi was standing with a friend in broad daylight, waiting to meet a group for a community service project, when two boys came by, claimed they had a gun, and robbed them.

It was a frightening experience, but also an educational one. "Now I know it can happen to me," Tim says. "In the future, I'd wait in a store."

In some ways, muggings seem an old-fashioned kind of danger. These days, worries about a child's independence go well beyond what can happen on a New York City street.

"With the Internet, it's difficult to know everybody your kid's talking to," says Loretta Lurie, whose 12-year-old daughter, Sydney, takes the city bus to school in Park Slope on her own. "In some ways, the Web is much scarier than letting them go to school and back."