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Association for Training on Trauma and Attachment in Children

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Approaching Adulthood:

What does "launch" mean for my children… and for me?

By John Ireland



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Early in my parenting journey, someone told me that children grow up, no matter what we do. I'm guessing I'm not the first parent to forget that—and then feel surprised when it's time for them to "launch."

My eldest daughter was born in 2005. Every few years after that, another sibling joined our family. For most of the past two decades, I have had at least one child in elementary school. By now, I like to think I'm very good at elementary school.

Parenting children at different stages feels a little like playing the piano: my left hand keeps a steady bass line while my right moves toward the higher keys, until I'm stretched across the keyboard at full wingspan.

In those early years, I transported my little ones to occupational, physical, and speech therapy, and eventually to talk therapy. I learned new acronyms and systems until I could discuss developmental ages and stages with providers, fellow parents, and social workers.

I learned how reflexes and movement patterns relate to motor development. When my eldest son leaped off landings on his way downstairs in second grade, I began to understand the sensory input he needed to feel himself in space. My middle daughter's selective mutism began to make more sense as I recognized her frustration in finding sounds and words to make herself understood. And I learned about trauma—so much about trauma: triggers, responses, and paths toward self-regulation.

Parenting taught me more than facts, theories, and techniques. Each lesson became a stepping stone, helping me find solid ground as I learned to support my children's different needs.

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Each education, transition, or service planning process offered the possibility of a crucial support, accommodation, or approach. Sometimes the goal was to help a child catch up with peers. Other times, it was to make room for more learning, play, and growth alongside friends.

Middle school was rough. For my kids, it brought the strongest pressure yet to leave simpler joys behind. As they pulled away from us and tried to fit in with peers, some still needed the reassurance of an involved parent. Yet our access to school was shrinking. In elementary school, we were welcome volunteers. In middle school, getting past the front desk started to feel like a security breach.

I have spent a lot of time writing letters to administrators. It's an acquired skill, especially when citing "least restrictive environment" and IDEA legislation. There is almost always an educator or administrator already advocating for my child. I'm always careful that my letters recognize that support while making clear that I am prepared to press for what my child needs. The tone I aim for is "warm regards, with documentation."

I detail benchmarks, progress, gaps in services, and proposed changes. Alongside the letters come visits, smiles, and carefully chosen administrators copied on emails. The message is clear: we are challenging the systems, not attacking the people.

While they were in high school, I worried that my adolescents might be moved along from grade to grade, only to reach the end unprepared. There are required credits to make up, social experiences only partly realized, and friend groups moving ahead with plans my children may not yet have. So much of parenting through these years involves white-knuckling it—and learning, bit by bit, when to let go. Sometimes I realize they might have done fine without my elaborate planning.

I hold onto the victories: inclusion on a sports team, a prom photo, a friendship that helps my child feel connected to classmates. And I never forget the school staff members who made it their mission to show up for my child and our family.

Long before my children were ready to use them, I had learned about vocational training coaches, Guardian Scholars programs, and Chafee grants—resources that might help with training, college, or the transition to adulthood. Now it's time to discover which supports fit.

Along the way, I wondered whether my children would develop their own vision of adulthood. Would they know what they wanted, or would I be choosing for them? I've come to recognize that parents far beyond fostering, adoption, and special education ask versions of the same questions: "When should I step back?" and "Will they launch?"

Then came the eighteenth birthday. I had anticipated a celebration… not losing my security clearance. I discovered that, without a Release of Information or Power of Attorney, I could no longer assume I would be able to speak with a doctor, make an appointment, or even get the information I needed to pay a bill. Sometimes I felt reduced to the Uber driver—with little access beyond the ride.

I imagine the greater privacy felt good to my young adults. I learned to discuss releases of information with them so I could continue helping where they wanted and needed support. Some tasks still needed my help to get done.

Over the course of their childhoods, I have felt like an attorney, therapist, specialist, or social worker, learning by working alongside those professionals. Certainly, I was manager and coach, but more and more, I'm simply a consultant—hired and fired seasonally, standing by in case they want my counsel.

There is no reset button. Our young adults are shaping their own lives, starting earlier than we might realize. We keep learning, even as our opportunities to put those lessons into practice change.

For some of us, there is one way to begin again: welcome another child and return to those familiar hoops, carrying everything we've learned. And this time, perhaps, write the instruction manual we always wished we'd had.

About the Author: John Ireland *and his husband became parents in 2005, fostering seven children and finalizing adoptions on a sibling set of five. In 2011, John co-founded RaiseAChild, focused on diligent recruitment to find safe and affirming homes for children. He consults with nonprofits on foster parent recruitment and support. You can reach him at John@iCareFOSTER.org.*