

The Day My Son Directed Himself to Film Camp

By Cathi Laughlin

"I want to ride my bike to camp." My back is toward my 12-year-old son as I fix waffles. He is enrolled in a film camp.

"Oh, do you?" I hope I don't sound uneasy.

I swivel around. I study my oldest child, Croy, carefully. I see the hazel-green eyes stare back at me. In front of me sits the body of a young man with darkening specks of hair peeking from his armpits and feet like a gorilla. But still, a boy's face with pimply puberty skin.

He hasn't asked for permission; he has affirmed his desire.

It is not that I am against him riding his bike to camp. Added exercise for him is welcome at anytime. But I am in the midst of pouring coffee and feeding our dog; his issues of independence have not been scheduled into my morning routine.

My husband and I are raising our four kids in Riverton, N.J., population 2,700. Lavender Victorian houses and thick 100-year-old oak trees adorn the streets. There is a tiny town hall and the Fourth of July is celebrated like the Millennium every year. A seemingly safe setting.

My husband and I both grew up in Philadelphia. Thirty years ago, kids rode bikes all the time, all day, anywhere. No one wore bicycle helmets because no one owned one.

It's not that I don't trust my son. But, my big bad city roots permeate me and make me cynical at times. And, life today seems more chaotic, especially for those of us raising kids.

It is 8:30a.m. and I am brushing my teeth." I am going to leave now, Mommy," Croy says. We both know he is riding his bike.

"Okay." I say with resignation. "Please be careful."

"I will." A quick kiss and he's off.

The film camp is about one and a half miles away. Croy knows the route. We travel these roads three, four, five times a day, but not on a bicycle.

After a short ride from home Croy will ride on a road that snakes through Burlington County. He will lock his bike at the town library. Then, he will walk across a major highway on a catwalk.



Since their births, my instincts have been to keep Croy and his siblings at a bird's eye view as they soar further away. How can I tell my dauntless son without feeding him excessive fear that allowing him to ride his bike alone to camp must be weighed against the prospect that a child molester may be lurking in the nearby park? Or that one wrong turn on the roadway by my son, or worse yet, a reckless driver, could result in a catastrophe beyond comprehension?

When my four kids were little people used to ask me how I stayed sane. Wiping a butt or a nose at the same time on different kids could move anyone to the edge. The emotional tasks that lay ahead would far outweigh the physical labors of changing diapers.

And as unfair as it seems, Croy is the first horse out of the gate. He is leading the others around the bend. Whatever decisions his father and I make while grooming our young stallion sets precedents for our other children. So, if we never let Croy try, will he ever be able to finish any race on his own?

And, while I THINK he can, more importantly, Croy KNOWS he can and does. At about 3 p.m. he strides through the door. A good day at camp. Safe journey to and from.

A few days later, Croy tells me he wants to ride his bike to his friend's house. To get there, he must cross railroad tracks. Another thing for me to obsess upon.

Call me when you get there, I say. He buckles his bike helmet and pedals away.

Some days I wonder who this person in my house is. When was the exact day my boy became taller than me? When was the first time his voice pitched from alto to soprano in the same sentence?

I remember the first time I saw my firstborn on a sonogram; I knew this was the real thing. Life would never be the same. It only got better. I want to tell Croy the exhilaration of watching him ride a tricycle for the first time and now seeing him pedal into the world without me.

And by the way, where is Croy? He hasn't called.

In seconds, I visualize horrors: news reports of missing children, crashed bikes at railroad crossings.

I am startled by the ring.

"Hello?"

"Mom, I'm here." I'm grateful.

Another bike ride down. Dozens more to sweat through.

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