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A Parent's Dilemma: When to Let Child be Responsible for Own Actions

By Maritza Martinez
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Monday morning, like most mornings, complete chaos unfolded in our house as four people – my two daughters, my husband and myself – aimed to head out the door by 8 a.m., our daughters for school and my husband and I for our offices.

The girls carried their backpacks, lunchboxes and school projects in tow – or at least one optimistic parent would hope. This particular morning, our fifth-grader had a special project to turn in: a tri-fold rendition of Marie Curie's biography. Her teacher gave three to four weeks of notice on the project with plenty of email reminders. I made sure my daughter checked out a research book, conducted her online research and finished the project three days before it was due because we would be out of town during the days leading up to the deadline.

However, just to be absolutely certain that she would have her project top of mind and would remember on her own to take it to school Monday, I asked her to go over the rubric to make sure she had not missed any of the required information, to which she replied that she was certain she had covered everything and she would leave "no points on the table."

So, on Monday morning I asked the girls to gather their stuff and get in the car. Their things were supposed to be neatly piled on the counter closest to the door that leads to the garage, you know, for easy access and so that the things in view inevitably prompt an "Oh, I need to take this with me as I walk out the door" reaction – or again, at least a parent would hope. The girls got in the car and, like more times than I care to remember, my daughter did not put her biography project with her backpack and forgot it.

Internally, I was incredulous that she forgot the project despite my subtle hints and suggestions night after night that she put all the things she needs to take to school in one pile, in view, so that they'll be easy to grab in the morning, instead of placing stuff in the home office or in her bedroom and then hunting for them in the morning.

After I just allowed them to make their way to the car and I went to the driver's seat, I just sat for a minute, entertaining an internal debate over my role: Should I remind her? Should I not? What percentage of her grade depends on this project? What's my role as a parent? If I do remind her, am I enabling her absent-mindedness and ridding her of ownership of her experiences?

I decided to go back in the house and have a moment of truth with my husband. I wanted to just let her show up to class without her project, while my husband, equally as frustrated, weighed heavily the impact this inaction on our part would have on our daughter's grade. My desire to let her experience this setback was outweighed by my husband's concern over the impact to her grade.

Then to my delight on my way back to the car, I saw my daughter headed back into the house! I was pleased because she remembered on her own, albeit a bit late.

But at that point I saw she had come back into the house not for her project, but because she had forgotten her sunglasses. Her sunglasses! Seriously?

As I stood in the middle of the family room and steaming about what I was seeing, I called her back and proceeded to quiz her about the day's date, whether she was certain she had all she needed, what about her biography project? Wasn't it due TODAY?

She perked up immediately, a startled expression on her face, and rushed back to her room to get it. Had I not a multitude of times covered the importance of leaving everything in one place to minimize the chances of forgetting it? Not just as it relates to school projects, but her lunchbox, her violin, and yes, even her backpack that has been forgotten a time or two!

After I dropped my daughters off at school, my husband and I talked on the phone to express our disappointment, define our roles as parents and further discuss our options. In retrospect, we both agreed we should not have reminded her about the project, thus letting her experience a lesson of failure this time, a direct result of her lack of discipline

and absent-mindedness. After all, isn't our role as parents to provide guidance, to promote learning from failures, and to help glean lessons from setbacks?

Or at least, that's the kind of parent I aspire to be.

I regret reminding her because a similar incident happened recently with her violin, and she clearly did not learn from that. So Monday morning, life provided her with another lesson that unfortunately my husband and I sabotaged ourselves. Ugh.

As a result, Monday's lesson for me is to stand firm next time in my conviction that I need in an unstated way to allow the girls to fail on projects such as this – with hopes the end result is that they one day become well-rounded, responsible and more accountable individuals.

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