Keeping Children Safe Is the Most Dangerous Thing You Can Do

When my three sons were young, they were all good at skateboarding. They built their own short ramps all over our property, but especially enjoyed the ramp a neighbor built in his barn. It was against the rules to go on this ramp alone; nevertheless, my 10-year-old went over there one day unnoticed, had a bad fall while trying some difficult maneuvers, and broke his arm.

Holding on to his arm to keep it from flopping at the wrist, he got up, left his skateboard, and began his journey across the fields. Despite being scared and in great pain, he made it through the gates, across the stream, and up the very steep hill to our house.

When speaking with the doctor later, I told him how I felt like a terrible mother. There was my poor child, alone, with no one to help him get home … and in pain! "Your son is a hero," the doctor reassured me. "You should be very proud of him. He got himself home with some difficulty, but he did it by himself. Most kids would have waited for someone to find them. What he did shows character. He will be successful in life."

Now I see that he was right. This incident was a real character-building moment in my son's life—and a parent-building moment in mine! Yet it runs contrary to the predominant theme in our culture, namely, the idea of keeping everyone—especially children—safe.

This idea, however, is one of the most dangerous things I can think of when it comes to children. It is a mistake to keep children from testing their boundaries, their abilities, their

skills, their failures, and the level of their own innate fears. In order to grow up healthy and brave and equipped to become adult, they must be allowed to face danger, learning to push against fear.

How can parents begin to let go of their children and let them run, breathe, and simply live? Here are a few things I've learned on that subject through my years of parenting.

1. Children Learn Best When They Mess Up

While it is easiest to learn by being taught, the reality is that children learn best and most often from their own mistakes or the mistakes of their friends. They remember it if they embarrass themselves. It is so tempting to try to keep your child from making an error. Don't do it. Restrain your urge to step in and instead allow them the chance to gain experience "the hard way."

2. Children Need *Some* Privacy

Some parents are positively invasive when it comes to their children's inner lives. They want to know what they are thinking or feeling at every step of the way. But why? What good will that do? Children are people, small and innocent, and often wrong. How will they learn to be themselves if their parents are crowded into their minds with them?

3. Children Need to Know How to Converse

While children need *some* privacy, they also need to know how to interact with others, including their parents. If you are interested in their inner life, or just want to talk to them about their day, teach them how. Give them time and

instruction on how to listen. Teach them how to repeat back what they heard to show they are participating in the conversation instead of just waiting to have their chance to speak. This means parents must first listen to their children with their entire attention. Children learn by example.

4. Children Need to Get Dirty

Children need to be allowed to play in mud puddles, or just build things in the dirt. Climbing trees and getting sap stuck to their skin, or scrambling over rocks and getting scraped on them, builds confidence in a child. Let them camp out in the backyard. Let them cook something their own way in your kitchen. It is exciting to know things, to have experience. And to have these experiences without parents breathing down their necks is crucial.

Perhaps the hardest lesson for a parent to learn is to trust their child. This takes courage—mothers and fathers know too much about what could go wrong to trust easily. But it is essential. If you are afraid to let your child walk next door, how are you going to handle letting them drive a car later?

There is a popular expression that says, "Old age is not for sissies." Well, neither is childhood. Nor parenting! Both are fraught with so many pitfalls and traumas. But there is another expression that we also need to take to heart: "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing well." Good luck out there!

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