

Helping Children Take Good Risks

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During the first period of a man's life, the greatest danger is not to take the risk.

– Soren Kierkegaard

Challenges and bumps in the road are a reality of every child's life. Children try out new behaviors and have uncertain thoughts and feelings. Change – and allowing one's self to be vulnerable – can be frightening and difficult. And beyond everyday personal challenges, the current generation of children is living through tumultuous and frightening times. Our greater world feels so risky that even young children worry about issues such as terrorism, global warming and disease. Adolescents face more immediate hazards: Internet dangers, unsafe sexual behavior, over-consumption of alcohol, and recreational drug use.

There are also the seemingly mundane issues that dot the landscape of middle childhood. For example, the third grader who won't speak up in class because he didn't understand last night's homework assignment, and is afraid to ask for the help he needs. This boy begins to avoid his teacher and his homework. Or consider the fifth grader who is desperate to impress his friends in the skateboard park and, in the process, becomes too much of a daredevil.

Our children also experience the fierce competitiveness – and the fast pace – of the twenty-first century when they are young. From early grades, many teachers assign a lot of nightly homework. Here in New York City, the intense competition for admission to private schools, specialized public high schools and top colleges exacerbates the pressure that children feel.

Can and Should We Create a Safety Bubble?

With these issues, and others, looming in the background, parents want to insulate children from harm. In the pursuit of protecting our chil-

dren, we may over-protect them. We won't allow our children to walk to the neighborhood pizza place unaccompanied by an adult until they are well into middle school, or take public transportation until they are in high school. We equate small physical risks, such as skateboarding, with minor hazards. Many of us require our teenage children to check in, almost hourly, via cell phone.

Further, in an effort to alleviate academic pressure, some parents become overly involved in their children's school work. We desperately want our children to succeed, and end up supervising homework assignments a little too closely, sometimes bordering on unintentionally doing the work for them.

It is natural to have anxieties, but when we act on them in this way, what is the cost to our children? With these messages from us, what are children learning about themselves and the world around them? And when we involve ourselves too heavily in their work, what message does it convey about their own responsibility and competence?

Risk is Inevitable – and Important

Risks – good and bad – are inevitable from birth. Yet, many of us haven't given much thought to the ways in which risk unfolds. With a toddler's first step, he is taking the risk of stepping out into the world – literally and figuratively. When a preschooler enters his new class of teachers and children for the first time, he is taking the risks inherent in separating from the only caretakers he's known. Can he be okay on his own without Mommy there to keep him safe, he wonders? A shy first grader who raises her hand in class to ask a question takes the risk of appearing stupid in front of her peers. She risks feeling embarrassed, or inadequate. Yet her raised hand allows her to take a risk that leads to feelings of self-assertion and self-expression. A third grader who has difficulty with math, but attempts to do his math homework himself, is taking the risk of feeling frustrated and incompetent. When he sits with it and endures his feelings, and does the assignment to the best of his ability, he will learn that tolerating frustration leads to feelings of control and autonomy. An older child who, despite doubts, tries out for a school play, risks feeling embarrassed and incompetent, but strives toward achievement and the desire to express herself. The teenager who runs for student government leader is making himself vulnerable to scrutiny and potential criticism. If he fails, he may feel unworthy.

In trying to follow his desire to become a leader, however, he takes a smart risk, one that has the possibility of fulfilling his aspiration of being useful and successful.

As parents, we have a fundamental responsibility not only to understand the inevitability of risk, but to know the importance of taking life's risks, small and large. Risk is part of development; thoughtful risk epitomizes the forward thrust of human growth and change. Risk-taking is a key developmental concept, and parents need to understand its significance as a teaching experience for children. Through parents' modeling, nurturing and teaching good risk-taking skills, children will be better prepared to meet life's challenges.

So, What is a Good Risk?

A good risk is an action, activity or behavior that, precipitated by careful thought, involves a "leap" toward the edge of safety and danger. Risk-taking, like other skills, needs to be learned and practiced over time.

We have identified four steps toward good risk taking. These are:

1. Identify the risk – physical, emotional, social or intellectual, or a combination of factors.
2. Stay aware of the potential dangers, and benefits, of moving forward or staying still.
3. Think through one's actions.
4. Evaluate one's actions afterwards.

If it is really important for our children to learn to take smart risks, what can we do to facilitate this behavior, and to minimize the taking of poor risks?

Understand Your Child's Temperament

Our children come into this world with a unique biological make-up that manifests in temperament. Thus, for some children, taking risks comes more naturally than for others. Others are born with the capacity to stop, think, and weigh out options before acting – but may need to learn how to go for the challenge. Some children are more willing to talk about these matters with their parents than others. But any child can become a good risk-taker with practice.

We parents also have our own temperament – and an experience-shaped lens with which we view our children and their behavior. The fit between

us is a product of many factors, and it is our responsibility to understand our fit, and modify or make it work better if our temperaments clash. Over time, children develop a personality that is comprised of their temperaments, their experiences and their fit with us. They develop a learning style that they take with them into school and beyond. It is not an easy task, but it is our work to understand all this as well as we can.

The Neuroscience of Risk-Taking

Aided by knowledge of child development, child psychology, education and the burgeoning field of neuroscience, we have the ability to help different types of children become thoughtful and good risk-takers, no matter what their natural temperament or learning style.

We now know that experience affects the brain, and the brain affects experience. Recent advances in neuro-imaging techniques show that experiences of all kinds alter the circuitry of the brain. Early deprivation can limit cognitive and emotional potential, and positive, attuned stimulation enhances the individual's potential. Children are born with temperamental tendencies and specific learning styles, and these can be modified over time through environmental input. This includes the influence of parenting style, teaching, and other forms of intervention.

For example, a child who has the tendency for shorter span of attention and impulsivity can – through maturation and environmental input – develop into an individual who can sustain longer and more focused attention and think through decisions that might otherwise throw him. How can this be accomplished? The answer is a combination of thoughtful understanding of the child's scope of strengths and weaknesses by parents and educators. Importantly, the parent who understands her own expectations and biases is better prepared to help her impulsive child learn to take well-thought-out challenges.

A child with a more cautious temperament may be at an advantage when it comes to taking smart risks; however, sometimes this same child can be inhibited, and have difficulty with the action part. However, she

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can be helped by her parent (or other trusted adult) to step out of her comfort zone. This child must also practice good risk-taking: identifying problems and opportunities, thinking through and weighing options, and then evaluating success – or failure. This process creates new brain circuitry, and reinforces existing brain circuitry that affects subsequent behavior.

Parents who understand that biology and environment are influential in the growth of a child, and that risk-taking unfolds with development, are in a position to raise good risk takers. This on-going work of parents – and other trusted adults – is key toward developing a good and thoughtful, rather than an impulsive and dangerous, risk-taking style.

Take Stock of Yourself

Thoughtful, positive risk-taking is best learned within the parent-child relationship, for parents are the conduit for teaching children about themselves and the world around them. If we are to help our children, it is most important for us to understand ourselves as well as possible. Our temperaments, life experiences, and how we were parented come together to influence how we journey through our own lives. Most relevant here is what we bring of ourselves to parenting.

Thus, parents can cultivate a thoughtful, self-reflective style that involves taking stock of our personal history. There are questions we need to ask ourselves about our childhood experiences. How were we raised by our parents, and how has that influenced what we say and do (or don't say or do) to our children? Were our parents strict disciplinarians? How did they teach us right from wrong? What messages did we receive about sex and sexuality? What attitudes did our parents hold about the roles of girls and women, and boys and men? Was our family emotionally close – or distant? Did our parents encourage independence, or did they foster dependence? What do we reject from our childhood experiences? Have we consciously decided to do some things differently? Sometimes in attempting to do it differently, we over-react, and create confusion in our children. The parent who vows not to treat her children in an angry, critical manner as she herself was treated may cut off her ability to be appropriately angry when it is necessary. Children invariably “push the envelope,” and a parent who has disabled her anger response is going to be pushed around more than is healthy for child and parent. This creates an anxious and, possibly, tyrannical

nical child, and perhaps one eager to take risks as a means of provoking a response from her parent.

When it comes to risk-taking, we need to examine, through memory and by asking siblings and parents, how issues of safety, security and risk-taking were approached.

For example, were we allowed to play actively to push physical abilities in the playground? Were our parents fearful of our getting hurt? Did they support challenges in sports and physical play? Did they gloss over or deny fears, or pain, from a fall or injury?

Did they support intellectual challenge – reading a difficult novel, or taking that AP English class? How was failure – a poor grade, a college rejection – handled? Did our parents make us feel embarrassed? Were we encouraged to go for our dreams as a child, be it writing poetry, playing football or putting together a rock band in the garage? Or were we taught to take the path of safety and security – the “straight and narrow”? We need to know the answers to these questions if we are to help our children learn good risk-taking.

Self-reflection is on-going work. Our children know us well – from what we say and do (and from what we don't say or do). They can be our teachers by letting us know through their words or behaviors if we are unknowingly hypocritical, clueless or overly protective.

When Risky Business Is Good Business

When children learn how to take good, thoughtful risks, they also learn how to think independently, with the confidence to examine all sorts of intellectual, social and cultural messages that don't make sense. Old and prejudiced notions about the inequality of men and women, and racial, sexual and cultural intolerance are issues that each of our children will struggle with during development. We hope, as parents, that our children can think through controversial issues without worrying what others think. Unfortunately, our society still contains much hidden hypocrisy and prejudice that gets passed on to the next generations through family and cultural messages. Children who are able to risk disagreeing with others, and who

can explore conventional attitudes and hold their own perspective, learn to risk the possible denigration that comes from expression of one's beliefs.

For instance, what if an adolescent decides to do volunteer work in New Orleans, helping to clean up and rebuild the city, and spends time talking with and listening to the experiences of the locals? What if he comes home with a new perspective on the role of government helping out in disasters that is critical of our government's administration? And what if this goes against the perspective of his parents and family members? Thinking independently and learning about others with a fresh and unbiased lens can be risky. A child who questions long-held beliefs and customs that are ingrained in his family and the culture at large may meet with disapproval. However, children and adolescents who think on their own and act from thoughtfulness and conscience will find that such risk-taking is a confidence builder with positive lifelong importance.

Understanding the processes of risk allows us to better understand and support our children and their growth and development. Risk is inevitable, and without learning the skills of good risk-taking, our children will be more apt to take impulsive and poor risks. Through the development of thoughtful risk-taking, children will be better equipped to leap at life's opportunities, and to rebound from life's disappointments. Learning to take smart risks early on prepares them to recognize and think through issues of safety and danger. They will have had experience identifying the challenge and the risk, and have worked with parents and teachers on how to proceed to the next step, using their intellect and emotional skills. They are also better able to struggle more tenaciously through failures because they have experienced small setbacks and received parental guidance in tolerating and learning from them. Our job is not to inoculate our children against taking risks, but to guide them toward taking good risks.

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