

Too Involved or Not Involved Enough?

Where do you fall on the continuum of being too engaged with your children or not engaged enough? Many parents micromanage their children's lives not giving them enough space to make their own mistakes or discover their own capabilities when they have the chance to think for themselves. Other parents hang back too much giving no direction or restrictions, and their children flounder guessing at what they should do and feeling confused about what is expected of them.

I once wrote a column on the days of "sandlot baseball." In their free time, which they seemed to have an endless supply of, kids would leave their house in the morning, meet at the neighborhood empty lot, and play together all day—unsupervised. Horrors! We can't allow that today. I don't entirely know why, but fear for our children's safety together with less and less trust in their own capabilities lead us to constantly supervised, over-scheduled, adult-structured activities. It's important to keep in mind that our fears *can* interfere with our children's developing minds, problem-solving skills and interpersonal relationships.

When children played unsupervised, they faced problems with each other, which they had to solve on their own. Sandlot baseball meant developing their own rules and regulations. That meant they had to argue, perhaps fight, and come to agreements if they wanted to play. I wonder what today's children would do in a situation like that. I know they are more capable than we give them credit for or allow them the opportunity to discover.

I always remember watching my daughter soon after she had mastered the skill of walking. She was climbing up the three steps on her toy slide and sliding down—over and over. She was so intent on her learning that she forgot I was in the room. I didn't remind her but sat quietly learning about her. Often she would climb to the top and fall to the floor. Each time, she got up, tried it again—always differently—until she got it. I watched in awe at her determination and learned how capable she was of correcting her mistakes. That small, seemingly insignificant event, helped me know that at each step along the

way, I could trust her to learn when I gave her the opportunity to figure it out. It isn't easy when we know a better or easier way. Learning when to step in and when to hold back is a never-ending balancing act.

I think many of us could do well by standing back a bit and watching; taking the time to see where our children are capable and where they are not. Where they are not, we need to facilitate their learning, helping them think through situations rather than telling them what to do. It requires letting go of our fears and trusting our children more.

When we are too little involved in their lives, they don't have enough time learning the skills of social interaction and communication with people who care about them. They may feel unimportant at home and so have to prove their importance on the playground. They can be horribly mean to one another. Bullying seems to be reaching epidemic proportion. But isn't it also possible that when we micromanage too much, our children don't develop the skills to stand up for themselves? If they get stuck or do something wrong, we tell them what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. We tell them when to eat and when not to, when to wear a coat and when not to, when it's okay to be upset and when it's not. When we get too involved with children's fights, we tell them to stop, we punish or reprimand, but we often don't give them the chance or the tools to learn to work it out.

When we can let go of "he'll never learn," or "she'd wouldn't do it if I didn't make her" or "I *have to* do it with him," we'll be of much greater service. When facilitating instead of directing, the trick is to be neutral. You are a coach and a sounding board, not a judge and jury. When your child knows you have nothing at stake in the outcome, she has the freedom to figure it out. But when you control by telling her what she *should* do, her own capabilities dwindle.

An example: "You were so angry about what happened you couldn't stop yourself from hitting. I know that you know that's not okay. I'm wondering what it was you were after. Did it turn out the way you wanted? How could you have gotten what you wanted? When you feel like hitting, what happens then? Is that what you want?" I don't advocate laying all these questions on at once, but this is the way to facilitate a child thinking through the process in his own mind rather than having to defend himself against your anger at the hitting.

We must find the balance—it will never be perfect—between getting too involved and not involved enough. The barometer to that balance is your child's ability to make decisions and argue his case with a sense of confidence rather than fear or bravado.