

Keeping Our Children Safe: Transforming Fear into Confidence

When you were an adolescent, were you a risk taker or a risk avoider? Our experiences in childhood greatly influence how we help or hinder our children as we project our own experiences in their direction, if not directly onto their path. If you were a risk taker, you might either encourage that quality in your children or become controlling in an attempt to protect them from the experiences you knew all too well. If you were more risk avoidant, you will have a hard time understanding a child who is a risk taker and may try to control and orchestrate their experiences to insure your peace of mind.

With the recent horrifying occurrences in our area, the question I'm asked is, "How do I protect my children?" I answer with a different question: "How do I empower myself so I can empower my children to be confident and capable in the event of whatever might happen?"

To begin we must look at how we deal with fear. Does it overwhelm you rendering you incapable of empowering your children and prone to overprotect? Or does it motivate you to face reality and learn what we all need to do to keep ourselves safe?

Fear can be debilitating. We can live surrounded by it as if in a fog, unable to see what life puts in front of us. Like having blinders on, we choose to see only what makes us feel okay. When something frightening happens, we retreat saying, "That will never happen to me." Ignoring or avoiding leaves us defenseless. This tendency is often passed down from risk avoidant parents who do not trust the outside world and keep their children on a very short, retractable leash. We do not learn and cannot teach effective safety measures from within that fog.

But for many, fear is a motivator to take action instead of retreat. We cannot control what happens, but we can grow stronger and better able to respond in the face of adversity. Being proactive means first recognizing the fear within, being aware of how fear acts on us, even if initially immobilizing, and acknowledging all of it instead of trying to make it go away or hiding from it. When we are conscious, even though afraid, we can take steps to move forward. It is only from this proactive place that we can empower our children to find their way and not get lost in the fog.

We have wonderful model of a fifth grade girl, grabbed by a potential abductor. She was proactive; she screamed, she ran, she got away to safety. She did not get locked in her fear. It motivated her. Use her as an example for your children.

Play “What would you do if...?” games with your kids ranging from *What would you do if your ice cream fell out of your cone onto the sidewalk?* to *What would you do if someone came to the house when we weren't home?* etc. etc. Make plans. Children feel empowered when they put themselves into arbitrary situations and make decisions about what to do. Your goal is to give your children confidence in the face of fear. We cannot know what we would actually do or feel if something were to happen, but we can strengthen our reserves with plans.

Like establishing a spot to meet outside your house in case of fire and practicing escape routes, establishing behaviors if someone strange were to approach gives us all more confidence. It does not mean we will always be safe, but confidence is the strongest antidote to fear. In our family, when our children were young, we made sure we had a meeting spot in case of separation every time we were in a crowded place. Sure enough, my 4 year old got separated. I was beside myself until I found her calmly waiting in the designated area.

Risky behaviors with little or no thought to the consequences of those behaviors are often engaged in by risk takers who feel too tightly controlled and protected. In that protection, they don't learn to be street-wise, to make plans for what to do if.... Many children are risk takers by nature. As parents we want to encourage and support who they are rather than try to make them risk averse. Risk taking is a wonderful (getting to be essential) quality to have to succeed in this world. We must not let our fears prevent us from teaching our risk takers how to be safe.

To learn more about risky behaviors vs. risk taking and how to best parent both preventatively for young children and proactively for teens, join us for The Family Center's fall conference on “Our Children and Risky Behavior” to be held on Saturday, November 14th from 8:30–1:00 at Reynolds Hall next door to The River Center, 46 Concord St. in Peterborough. Our keynote address titled, *Delay Your Gray: Keep Your*

Child Safe and Yourself Sane will be given by Liz Driscoll Jorgenson, a psychotherapist and Congressional Award winning prevention activist from CT. Workshops will cover several contributing factors to risky behavior (including my workshop, *Discouraging Risky Behavior; Encouraging Risk-Taking Behavior*) and a panel lunch will bring all the presenters together for discussion. Please call Amy McGee at 603 924-6306 for information and registration. Childcare is also available. I hope to see you there.