

Protecting and Preparing

As parents, our first responsibility is to protect our children from harm, whether physical or emotional. We buy a crib that meets safety standards, we hold their hands crossing the street, we use discipline methods that don't humiliate them, we teach them to beware of strangers.

But we're fooling ourselves if we think that we can prevent unpleasant things happening to our children. At some point, something will threaten their well-being, and we will not be there to make it go away. Will we have prepared them to cope? Will they have the confidence to know they can deal with disappointment, frustration, loss and pain?

Challenges lead to growth

If you think your job is to protect your children from ever feeling any pain, consider that many important life skills come with a degree of discomfort. Everyone who learns to ride a bike has to put up with skinned knees. For many children, learning to read comes with a hefty dose of frustration and tears. And in the realm of social relationships, it may take a number of episodes of schoolyard betrayal and rejection for children to discover how to recognize true friendship.

Children need the chance to work through problems on their own so that they can feel proud of their ability to overcome difficulties. If you concentrate too much on protecting your children from possible harm, they may be missing out on opportunities to gain self-confidence.

Increase challenges gradually

The trick for a parent is judging how much of a challenge is enough. You want to stretch your children's abilities, not set them up to fail and seriously injure themselves. Since an infant can do nothing to defend himself, the responsibility for his safety and comfort is entirely in your hands. But as a child matures and gains physical, emotional and intellectual skills, you can offer more scope for safe exploration and limited risks.

For instance, when you go to the park, let your preschooler climb the ladder alone, but stay close, ready to catch, just in case. Your role is to supervise, not to control. Research shows that the most serious injuries on play structures happen to children who have not had a chance to try things on their own. Because these children don't learn to judge risks or recognize their own limits, they don't learn to be careful and protect themselves.

Teach skills

Part of protecting your children is actively teaching the skills they need to protect themselves. For example, before you let your children stay home alone, enroll them in a babysitting course with a first aid component. Be sure to clearly state the rules for what they can and can't do when you're not there. Then ask them questions: "What would you do if...?" Tell them you believe in them: "I know you will use your good judgement to decide what's best in this situation." Both you and they need to be sure that they will take the precautions that will keep them safe.

Overcome your fears

If you feel the need to control your children's lives so they never experience hurt, it may be more because of your own fears than your children's need for protection. Perhaps you were bullied as a child. That experience may make you extremely sensitive to any situation where your children are teased or excluded from a group. You may feel compelled to rush in and rescue them from a situation you remember as very painful. But what message do your children get if you rescue? They may decide that the world is too dangerous for them to go into alone. They may get the message that you don't think they're able to handle everyday challenges.

Try to put your own past experiences aside and deal in a realistic way with the current situation.

- Is this something your children can work through on their own?
- Do they just need you to listen and comfort them?
- Could you ask some questions that will guide them to find their own solution?
- Would it help to actively coach them in skills to deal with the problem?
- Do you also need to work with other adults (other parents, teachers and coaches) to create a safer community in the long term?
- Or is this an urgent danger where your children really do need an adult to step in immediately and protect them?

Building self-reliance

In the end, your parental responsibility to *protect* is balanced by your responsibility to *prepare* your children for the ups and downs of life. They need to be protected from threats that will overwhelm them, but they also need the challenges that will push them forward to develop good judgement, self-reliance and emotional strength.

by Betsy Mann