

Protecting children

by Doctor Jo Jones, Paediatrician – www.healthcare4kids.co.uk

A number of child psychologists are becoming increasingly worried and outspoken about the way we as parents are bringing up our children, and I agree with them. I'm a Consultant Paediatrician who sees a large number of children with behavioural and psychological problems in clinic, and I'm not sure if I buy all of this safety stuff regarding children. You see, I do think that while we are busy protecting our kids from every possible and conceivable form of harm, we are teaching them nothing about the life skills they need to develop in order to have that all essential 'toolkit for life'.

In some people's eyes, I might be a 'pretty bad mum'. I've never used a stair gate (my children were safe and confident on stairs by 14 months, and none of them have ever fallen down the stairs), I don't use special foam things to go on the corners of tables and cupboards, other foam chunks to stop doors slamming on little hands, clips inside cupboards to stop little hands getting in places they shouldn't be.....the list is endless, and somebody out there is making an awful lot of money making us feel we are irresponsible Bad Parents unless we fill our homes with these gadgets.

Why ever not use these things, you might say? Shouldn't we be protecting our little ones from any form of harm at all times? I guess I'd like to answer no, we shouldn't be, and at the very least, stimulate some debate on the subject.

Whereas putting the bleach well away from reach makes absolute sense, I've found that the little clips inside cupboards are an absolute pain in the neck, and this is why. Putting them on the doors doesn't actually teach the kids that they shouldn't open them in the first place; it simply teaches them that there's something in there that they mustn't have....so they want it even more....so, when they come to my house (no clips remember) or their grandparents or the nice lady next door's house, they are in and out of the cupboards like yo-yo's. Has that child learnt about protecting himself? I don't think so.

This is just an illustration of my point – that we have to teach kids what will happen if they do something dangerous. How does anyone learn best? By being told, or being actually shown? It doesn't take a genius to know the answer. Hot cups of tea are a good example. They're certainly dangerous, so how do we teach that to our children? "Keep all cups of tea away from children at all times!" But we don't always manage that as the phone rings, it's mayhem at breakfast time, and the little hand reaches out in investigation. I've seen the dreadful results many times in hospital Casualty departments. A better way to learn is to actually experience, and a child who has never had their hand touched lightly against the side of a hot cup of tea, not enough to hurt but enough to make their eyes widen with understanding, has learnt nothing. By understanding exactly what 'hot' means, a child then develops an experiential understanding about hot radiators, hot cookers etc, which is more valuable than all the words in the world.

I've had Mums look at me with envy saying, "I wish I could be so relaxed about my children." Is 'relaxed' the right word? I'm not sure that it is. I watch them like a hawk in some ways, including what goes in their mouths and what goes into their eyes, ears and therefore brains, but I do believe that children need to experientially learn about edges, heights, sharp corners, things that are hot, and so on.

Another 'biggy' brought up time and time again by concerned psychologists is that children are not being allowed out to play alone or with friends. I did as a kid. I bet you did too. And just think what you learnt from it. A recent study by University College London found that children who play outside unsupervised are healthier, more socially able, and have better self-help skills. I want that for my children, and I want them to make safe decisions independently as early in life as possible. Children can only make safe decisions by being put in a situation where they make their own decisions in the first place. The first decisions are tiny little ones with no real consequences if they get it wrong. Passing that test gives a leg up to the next one, and so on. This next true story is a good example.

My nine year old walks or bikes to a local 'club' on her own. The club is 400 yards up the road in a quiet by-passed village. Cars are few and far between, and she has already learnt to cross the road to post letters, visit friends etc. This short trip on her own is the next step in acquiring common sense, and she has passed the previous 'tests' with flying colours. I think she is ready to take that responsibility and, what's more, she is equipped to do so because I have allowed her to take those first small steps, and she has been learning all the way. However, allowing her to walk to club has incurred the disapproval of 'Club Leader'. This was our conversation. "You mustn't let your daughter come alone..." "Why not?" "Well.., you just mustn't...we prefer all our children to be picked up" (even the 11 year olds)... What exactly are you worried about, Club Leader? Cars? There are very few, and she knows how to cross the road carefully. Bad Men? She knows exactly what to do, because I have spoken to her about it, and I think we all know that there are no more bad men now than there were 50 years ago when you and I walked to school, Scouts or our friend's house with confidence...

Club Leader and I have come to an agreement. I have written a letter taking full responsibility for my child outside club hours (which I think I have anyway), and Club Leader and I agree to disagree. Another mum wants her 10 year old to walk to school and back. Same quiet village. Very little traffic. Not even a road to cross, now I come to think of it. But, school staff are not happy. What are they worried might happen? Do they actually know why they are worried?

Can I ask this question? What exactly are we scared of? If we don't know, how on earth are our kids going to know? And if they don't know, how can they equip themselves to cope with it, develop the tools needed to combat it? They will simply grow up with a constant sense of unease, fear, lack of confidence, internalising their parents' anxiety...but the worst thing is that they won't even know why they are feeling like that, or what to do about it! When I see anxious and even depressed children in clinic, my task is to start to unpick where all that stress and lack of confidence came from. American rich kids have far higher rates of anxiety and depression than their poor counterparts. Why is that?

When I ask my friend why she won't let her daughter go out on her own, she says, "Maddie Mc Cann!" But the real reason is not tragic Maddie, but the media using these very rare occurrences, that have happened very infrequently through the years with no increasing frequency, to sell newspapers (that's the main reason, believe me!) and amplify a negligible risk into a drum beat of doom. Far from logical thinking, parents imprison their children indoors to try to placate their own undefined and irrational fear.

Newspapers make us feel Bad Parents if we don't put large railings, preferably with a pad lock, round our garden in case a Boogie Man steals our child, if we don't walk them to the corner shop 20 yards down the road (more Boogie Men) to get their Saturday lolly, if they walk to school alone or more likely with their friends (yet more Boogie Men). I get it – it's all about Boogie Men? Actually, the main threat to our children is traffic...full stop. Now that really has increased ten fold over the past fifty years, unlike the Boogie Men. If your child isn't safe crossing the road alone, they need to be taught, and if they misbehave and muck about on roads, don't stop them trying to cross, teach them even more! Why? Because that's going to protect and even save their lives much more than being kept indoors, safe and sound but glued to the TV, Nintendo DS, and, bizarrely for parents who claim to want to protect their children, being fed the over processed salt, fat and sugar laden rubbish that passes for some children's food these days (but more about that next time).

Back to the debate. Children deserve to feel safe. If we as parents project our overwhelming yet unnamed fear onto them without explanation or rationalisation, we don't end up with kids who feel safe at all. They feel scared...and anxious...and devoid of the right type of confidence, the type where they know exactly what to do because they have been there before, with parental advice. We owe it to children to really understand, rather than simply being told. To experience in a small way what nasty things feel like, so that they can work out how to avoid experiencing them in a big way.