

Balancing Independence With Safety ~ Kidpower Response to *Free Range Kids*

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Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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Last year, journalist Lenore Skenazy provoked a media firestorm when she allowed her nine-year-old son to ride the subway in New York City alone and wrote about her decision in her newspaper column. In her new book, *Free-Range Kids: Giving Our Children the Freedom We Had Without Going Nuts with Worry*, Ms. Skenazy makes her case that the world is a safer place than many parents imagine. She provides research to show that many things parents worry about are exaggerated, and critiques many products of the "child safety industry," such as baby knee pads to avoid getting bruised knees while crawling.

Free Range Kids makes some good points and is interesting reading. I agree that children need the freedom to try things out on their own even if they might make mistakes or get hurt. I also agree that we adults cannot create a risk-free world for our children and that, in trying to do so, we risk harming them. As the mother of a child we'll call "Ariel" told me, "I tried to protect Ariel from everything. I never let her climb up a playground structure for fear of her falling. I didn't let her play in a swimming pool because of germs. And I kept her away from children and activities that might stress her too much.

"Then, when she was almost eight, Ariel got terribly sick. As I sat with her in the hospital room, I thought about all the fun my fear had kept her from having. When she thankfully got better, I decided to set my fear aside and take more risks. Ariel has broken her arm, got head lice, and had to cope with bullying. But her joy in doing new things has been worth it!"

The reality is that, on a statistical basis, a child's biggest risk of being killed in the United States is from being a passenger in a car. However, by taking reasonable precautions such as using seatbelts and car seats and



Learning balance to be safe!

not text messaging while we are driving, we can reduce the risks in exchange for the benefits of using our cars. The same approach makes sense about other decisions adults make for children.

No matter how careful we are, we need to accept that bad things might happen that are simply out of our control. We want to take reasonable precautions and teach our children the skills they need to empower them to go out and enjoy their lives, rather than living in an unnecessarily restricted, fearful bubble.

So what are reasonable precautions? In order to make wise decisions, parents and other caregivers need to assess the abilities and vulnerability of each child and the potential problems in each situation. We can then determine whether this specific child is ready to handle this specific situation independently and, if not, what this child would need to know and be able to do in order to become ready.

We need to remember that children develop their skills at different paces and have different personalities. When a child has learned a set of skills, the next step is to help this child learn how to generalize the use of these skills for different locations and situations. What is going to be safe for one child at a given age in a given situation might take longer or require extra precautions for another child.

In our family, we did allow our eight-year-old son to ride his bike in our neighborhood, because he had shown that he could be trusted to keep his bike helmet on, watch where he was going, stay on quiet streets, avoid dangers, and get help if he needed to. Once, when he was riding, a man he didn't know yelled at our son to, "Get over here!" Instead, he sped up on his bike and came home to tell us what had happened. I was somewhat freaked out, but my son wasn't upset because, as he explained, "I didn't have to worry because my body just knew what to do." He had the Kidpower skills and life experience that he needed in order to deal with this threatening situation when it arose.

This story is a good example of the importance of practicing skills instead of just talking about potential problems and just discussing what to do or not do. It would be irresponsible to let children ride their bikes not knowing how to deal with traffic and not wearing a bike helmet. It would be very risky simply to let children go into the water without first teaching them how to swim, how to assess the safety of different places they might find water, and what their limits are. For the same reasons, we should not let children go out into the world without first having the skills to deal with difficult or potentially dangerous people as well as other problems.

There are many different kinds of harm that can damage a child's joy in life, and we cannot afford to ignore or minimize these genuine hazards. On a day-to-day level, countless children are miserable in school because of bullying or are devastated because of child abuse, much of which is still not reported. According to the American Prosecutor's Institute, there are over 100,000 attempted abductions by non-family members in the US each year, each of which has the potential to be very frightening for the child approached and for everyone around that child. Not all tragedies can be prevented, but every year, too many children are traumatized or killed because they lack a few simple skills.

It is not useful to be paranoid about the risks. Instead, adults owe it to their children to be realistic, to prepare them when they are ready, and to protect them until they can protect themselves. Whether the issue is Fire Safety, Bike Safety, Water Safety, Food Safety, or People Safety (people being safe with people), most children can develop the understanding and skills necessary to keep themselves safe most of the time. They can learn to wash their hands to protect themselves from most germs. They can learn to set boundaries to prevent problems and build better relationships with people they know. Without both knowledge and skills, children are far more vulnerable than they need to be. At Kidpower, we know that learning how to take charge of your safety can be fun and empowering rather than frightening. Check out our website at www.kidpower.org to learn about the tools Kidpower offers to help adults prepare children

to explore their world with confidence and safety.