

Safety Plans For Preparing Children Do Things That Make Adults Worried

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Children's drive to explore and be more independent can give ulcers to their parents. It can be challenging to find the right balance between keeping children safe while letting them visit new places, be with new people and do more adventurous things.

The Boy Who Thought He Could Fly

I can remember my son Arend at age 4 suddenly shimmying up almost to the top of the flagpole in front of his sister's school. I stood looking up, feeling quite helpless, wringing my hands. "You are up too high!" I said, trying not to sound as nervous as I felt.

"No I'm not!" Arend announced. "Look, Mommy, I can even grip with my legs and let go with my hands." He waved his hands happily to show me, thirty feet above the hard cement. "I bet from here, I could REALLY fly!"

"Please come down right NOW, Arend!" I said as firmly and calmly as I could, wondering what I was going to do if he didn't. "I see that you are not up too high for **you** but you are up **way** too high for **me**!"

"Oh all right," my son sighed and slid down.

As scared as I was, it would not have worked for me to tell Arend that he could never climb or even attempt to fly. Either he would have been so driven that he would have found ways to try to do this secretly and perhaps more dangerously or he would have become fearful.

Instead, we made a plan that Arend had to agree with me ahead of time about where he **could** climb and

where he could **not**. We looked for places where, if he fell or failed to fly, at least he would have a soft landing. He would leap off the top of a play structure, flapping his arms wildly on his way down to the sand and then announce triumphantly, "See! I stayed up in the air for at least a minute that time!"

One sad day, when he was about six, Arend came to me and said mournfully, "Mommy, I have figured out that I can't fly. I used to stay up for a few seconds, but now I'm heavier and I fall faster. I will never ever be able to fly like a bird."

"Oh, Arend!" I said, hugging him, torn between relief and sorrow. "You will fly in other ways. You have already flown in airplanes. You can go hang-gliding when you're a little older. And you can fly in your dreams."

"None of that is the same!" my son said sadly. And I had to agree that he was right.

Taking Small Steps First

It's important to help children find safe ways to get ready to do new things. After one of our workshops, nine-year-old Sophia's mother pulled our instructor Marylaine Leger aside and asked for help. "I'm a survivor of childhood abuse," Sophia's mother said. "And I want to do everything in my power to prevent what happened to me from happening to Sophia. She wants to go to a friend's house for an overnight, but I'm afraid to let her go. I have never let her stay overnight with anyone."

"What are you worried about?" Marylaine asked.

"I don't know these parents very well," Sophia's mother explained. "And I am afraid that this family might have different standards than we do for safety. Sophia might just go along with whatever this family does instead of saying that something is against her safety rules."

"It's your job to keep Sophia safe," Marylaine said. "But sooner or later, Sophia needs to be able to go to a friend's house and stay overnight without you. Instead of taking such a big step right away, I think you could work on smaller steps. Think about what you need to know about this other family and to see from Sophia in order for you to feel that she is ready."

"I would recommend that you have a visit with this other family in order to get to know them better. Maybe you can start by inviting Sophia's friend over to your house. Discuss with her parents what each of your expectations are about supervision and activities. You can tell Sophia that you want to see that she is in the habit of speaking up for herself, checking with you before changing plans and telling you about problems. Give her specific opportunities to show you that she can do this. Tell her that taking these smaller steps will show you when she is ready to stay overnight somewhere without you."

Marylaine also explained the plan to Sophia, who said, "That could work!"