Fear or Cheer: When to Say "No" — When to Let Go

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

Imagine a conversation between two parents sitting on a park bench at the local playground:

Mark: *"My son loves to climb. He is absolutely fearless. He'll climb anything. I consider every day without a broken bone a miracle!"*

Anne: *"My daughter is the same! I have nightmares worrying about concussions or being called a negligent parent. I don't know when to give in to my fears and tell her 'No' and when I should cheer her on! Were you a climber as a child?"*

Mark: *"Oh yes, and I had the broken bones to prove it!"*

Anne: "*Did that stop you?"*

Mark: *(Sigh) "Nope."*

At this point, Anne and Mark fall silent. They watch Mark's son, Joseph, scale the ladder to the highest slide, right behind Anne's daughter, Marguerite. Marguerite zooms down head first, piercing their silence with her shrieks of delight.

– Solution –

Fear or fearless: What is safe?

We want our children to have confidence and not live in fear but at the same time we don't want them to be "fearless." A friend of mine remembers her mother's admonition to "be careful" and how she had longed to be sent out the door with a cheerful "have fun" instead.

The dilemma Anne, Mark, and my friend's mother share with most parents is that of figuring out what is and isn't safe. The slide Marguerite is playing on loops in circles and the children arrive at the bottom in slow motion. In fact, half of the children on the playground come down that slide headfirst. And yet, even with this information, Anne feels unsure that Marguerite's behavior is safe.

Safety is not something that we can determine by majority vote. The best we can do is evaluate each situation and use our hearts as well as our minds to decide. What may be safe for an adventurous and active Marguerite, may not be appropriate for a less agile child. The key is to base our decisions on our child's needs and abilities and not on our fears.

Temperament matters

Both Anne and Mark have active children who delight in new challenges. These traits may reflect their temperaments. Whatever temperament traits we are born with will influence all of our life experiences.

Consider what happened when Inga, Marcia, and their daughters, Jessica and Mai Lin, went on a recent sledding excursion. Neither girl, both just under three, had played in the snow very often. While Jessica clung to Inga's waist, Mai Lin

Roslyn Duffy is the co-author with Elizabeth Crary of *The Parent's Report Card* (Parenting Press) and co-author with Jane Nelsen and Cheryl Erwin of *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* and *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years* (Prima Press). Roslyn, a 17-year veteran director of a child care program in Seattle, Washington, lectures and teaches classes for both parents and teachers, and is a counselor in private practice. She has four children and three grandchildren. Visit www.RoslynDuffy.com.

jumped on a sled and careened down the hill at once. Mai Lin's squeals of terrified joy trailed behind her on each descent, after which she would bounce up, drag her sled behind her and call out, "More! More!"

The temperaments of these two were consistent in their approaches to preschool, too. Mai Lin was the first to raise her hand to volunteer for any new adventure while Jessica took weeks to gather the courage to sit at group time without the protection of a teacher's lap. Temperament is something each of us is born with, and there are no right, wrong, good, or bad temperament traits. (For more on this topic, check out the section on "Temperament" in *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers*, Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy; Three Rivers Press, Random House, 3rd edition, 2007.)

Perspective

We can also inherit certain traits or abilities. A physical approach to life is not easy to discourage, as Mark admitted by remembering his own climbing days — not even when broken limbs result. A perspective shift can help us reframe a behavior as a gift or talent, instead of as a curse.

Anthony was a runner in his preschool years. He never walked from place to place — he raced. "Slow down" and "Use your walking feet" were phrases that followed him from hallway, to classroom, to his family's living room. But, for Anthony, movement was a way of life. It came as no surprise to his weary family and teachers when, years later, Anthony began his professional soccer career. Anthony was born with a talent for movement and, though raising him might have been a challenge for his parents, Anthony kept going.

Skills balance thrills

Even the most fearless child will need skills to succeed. If climbing is the issue, as with Anne's and Mark's little ones, it is important that whatever a child climbs up, she must also climb down. Do not lift her up to things she cannot get to on her own. Instead of lifting her down from a too-high perch, stand below and talk her through the descent: "Put your foot on the bar below you. That's right. Now move your hands down to the next bar. . . ." Step-by-step, she will descend, but with each step her skill level will climb.

Whatever the thrill a child seeks, determines what skills he will need to accomplish it with safety. A child ready to leap into any lake or puddle is a prime candidate for frequent and early swim lessons. But even with lessons, this child will require extra vigilance and supervision around water.

His lessons will need to include water safety rules that he practices over and over again: walking (instead of running) on slippery pool decks; having an adult with him before getting into the water (something he can practice beside a swimming pool before each lesson begins); and not wading into water more than waist deep.

Risks and rules

Children also need to learn how to assess risks. Early experiences, such as having to climb down whatever she climbs up, sets the stage for this. Although children younger than three will need to have rules stated in clear and simple terms, older children can be guided to assess risks and agree on rules before play begins.

If there is a large and tempting tree in a friend's yard, go up to it and examine it together. Help her notice the thin branches and ask if she thinks those branches are strong enough to hold someone her size. The key word here is '"think." Questions such as these invite her to think. Show how the branches sag when touched. Would it be safe to climb on a tree with thin or weak branches? Why or why not? This process helps her learn to assess situations by thinking them through and engaging her in the rule-setting process.

When children are given opportunities to think about and help formulate rules, they will be more cooperative about following them. In either case, enforcement and supervision will still be necessary (children have imperfect impulse control), but cooperation and compliance will improve when expectations are clear or when older children are involved in the whole process.

Action not reaction

Once a rule is clear — action is necessary. If the rule is ignored — do not ignore the forbidden behavior. Talk a child back to safety: down from that tree or back to shore, then take his hand and leave the area. Don't argue, lecture, or threaten. Act. Remove him from the situation. When he complains (a pretty sure bet), ask him what the rule was? He WILL remember.

Reassure him that you are confident he can do a better job of remembering the rules next time. He may not be happy with the outcome (another sure bet); but he will know that you mean what you say, and that is something he WILL remember — next time.

Safekeeping

Skills, as well as the ability to assess safety needs, will improve with practice. In the meantime, supervision, calm responses, and firm but

clear actions are the best defense we can provide for our children's safety.

The rest of the time — we can cheer them on with a heartfelt "have fun" and let that silent "be careful" stay inside our hearts.

What problems do you experience?
Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation.

Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear.
Elements of several problems may be combined for this column.
Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.