



PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

# Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer with Alison Beanblossom

thump thump thumpthumpthumpthump thump thump thump grin

Fifteen-month-old Schon hurtles herself across the wobbly bridge. Mommy Alison stands nearby looking calm. Gramby (me) stifles a gasp with a smile of applause, restraining an impulse to intervene!

We are at a little urban park in Wrigleyville, and Schon is demonstrating new skills for her just-arrived grandmother. I haven't seen her for several weeks, so I am unsure what her abilities are. And, being new to grandparenting, which includes observing my children as parents, I am busy learning about all of them and about myself.

As Schon continues to stagger back and forth, pausing to carefully study the other children so engaged, I am busy observing her mother. She is so watchful, so laid back, so proud. Schon could certainly fall off the bridge, but she doesn't. Alison might be expected to intervene, but she doesn't. And Gramby learns new respect for the abilities of each of them.

Later we talked about safety and risk and my bringing it up caused Alison to ask if she's too laid back. It's an interesting discussion. As grandparent (which must be acknowledged as a different role) I tend to be a bit nervous; Alison is vigilant yet relaxed — that's what feels right to her and is a powerful gauge for parenting. She evaluates the risks and she is a keen observer of her daughter's abilities which leads to her level of confidence. The abilities we're talking about go beyond physical development to Schon's ability to evaluate risk for herself.

Later I was there to observe another playground scenario — again starring Schon. She had climbed the ladder and whizzed down the slide with great delight and success, and was coming around for another go. A child a bit older was climbing the rope ladder to get to the slide. Schon stood on the ladder, watched the other child go up the ropes, and decided to try the ropes herself. She stood for a long time testing the feel of the ropes with her arms and her feet before attempting the first rung. Then she paused, climbed down, and returned to the sturdy ladder for her ascent. She had evaluated the risk and her own abilities and made her decision. Impressive risk assessment.

There's a rocking 4-seater apparatus at the park. Several days in a row I lifted her onto the seat and she'd rock back and forth with abandon, then make her universal word for everything "enh" when she wanted help down. One day she just climbed up by herself — over and over again, practicing until she was sure, reaching for me with her "enh" to get down so she could climb up again. And then she seemed to forget about help with down and just did it all herself, very methodically until she could do both maneuvers with ease.

Of course Schon sometimes has a fall, some days lots of them. She whimpers if the fall seems to merit some attention, and then pulls herself up and she's off for the next adventure. But the bumps don't wound her in any alarming sense; they offer her opportunity to learn, or not — her choice.

With all of our concerns about safety and risk, Alison and Schon are a lesson about the value of some risk in the lives of children. Schon is protected by the choices Alison and Blake make about where to take her and the opportunities they provide for her. They allow her a margin of risk so that she can use what she knows about herself to explore. She is empowered as a physical learner to evaluate her own risk and make some choices for herself. As a very young child, her rights are honored and her voice respected.

When she is satisfied with her practice, proud of an accomplishment, she grins at us, pigtails flaring and claps her hands. High on life and sharing it.

Alison was getting her ready for bed, reviewing the day and the bumps and bruises in their sleepytime conversation: "Muffin, you look like a little girl who knows how to have a good time."

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