



MAGAZINE

Too Much of a Good Thing?

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Risk-averse parents do their children no favors

By Michael Ungar

Q: I'm seeing more parents who live in safe, middle-class communities and protect their children from every imaginable risk. Is this another form of enmeshment or are parents really acting in their children's best interest?

A: In my practice with "at-risk youth" and their families, I've been noticing a disturbing trend: delinquent youth, sexually promiscuous teens, and even street-involved young people who come from caring, stable, financially secure homes in middle-class communities. When I look closer, what I'm typically finding is parents who've bubble-wrapped their children, insisting on protecting them from exposure to any risk, responsibility, or adventure.

These families seem to offer a socially approved form of enmeshment, in which parents can overfunction and justify their control as necessary. Developmentally, however, risk-averse parents may actually be causing unintended harm to their child's psychosocial development when they protect him or her from normal developmental challenges, like sleepovers, riding a bicycle to school, operating tools, cooking, or playing sports that can cause injuries.

It's hard to blame them for their excessive concern, however. A barrage of media reports about a generation at risk has created the perception that there's a need for overprotection. This, despite abundant evidence from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Child Trends, and the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics showing that years of national prevention efforts have decreased children's risk substantially.

Children today are less likely to be abducted by a stranger, less likely to use hard drugs or alcohol, just as likely as their parents to be sexually active (but far less likely to get pregnant), and less likely to commit a crime or be the victim of one. In fact, the greatest dangers to children are events that occur in the home and/or are conducted by someone the child knows: sexual and physical assault in the home, kidnapping by a relative, and gun-related death that occurs in the child's own home or involves someone known to the child. Even Internet solicitations for sex occur overwhelmingly when the child is at home. It's an ironic truth that, statistically speaking, children from middle-class families are safer outside their homes than inside.

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