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GO EXPLORE!

The following activities are simple age-appropriate ways to give kids a chance to explore risk-taking:

- » Let kids use tools to build projects such as bird houses or tree forts.
- » Teach them to build fires and light candles.
- » Allow them to go to the park on their own or to the mall with friends.
- » Encourage (or at least tolerate) consensual rough play, wrestling, play-fighting, using sticks as swords, etc.
- » Give them opportunities to explore unknown areas on their own, such as a walking trail, or nature conservatory.
- » Have kids try out new activities, such as bouldering (rock climbing without ropes and harnesses).

Before the above activities are experienced, have an open discussion with your kids about strategies of responding to unexpected challenges, and provide progressively less supervision. Most importantly, let them know that you trust their judgements. The perception of having parental trust and support encourages healthy decision making and deters unhealthy risk-taking.

Accountability without termination may be the cornerstone of all the principles of harm reduction. It is the act of never giving up on your child: No matter how many mistakes they make along the way, you don't hold grudges, you don't cut them off completely, and you always treat them with respect and concern while still holding them accountable and helping them to understand the consequences of their actions. An abundance of research shows that a firm and loving approach to parenting, which is embodied by this principle, bolsters a child's confidence, and reduces the likelihood of higher risk behaviours in adolescents.

Sebastian is trying to get better marks at school and has been working hard to do so. He had an important test at school, but the night before he and his buddy went skating instead. The test was harder than he expected, and he didn't do very well. He feels crummy and was bummed when he told his mom about it:

"Sebastian, there will always be tough choices to make. You're disappointed about this mark, and you know you would have done better if you had chosen to study more. You've been working so hard; it's disappointing for you to do poorly this time. How can I help you to achieve the success you're looking for?"

PAVING THE WAY FOR HEALTHY RISK-TAKING

Parents can prepare kids to navigate through this tricky period long before adolescence develops by seeking opportunities for their children to explore risk-taking behaviours in a safe environment. Allowing children to participate in consensual rough play, or to independently explore the jungle gym at the park prepares them to assess risk, make decisions, and read social cues. One study assessing risky play and children's safety found that a child deprived of risk opportunities is subject to lack of independence and diminished learning, perception, and judgement skills. That same child is at an increased risk of obesity and mental health concerns. Risk-taking allows children to test their limits and to avoid or make changes to the dangerous environments and activities to which they expose themselves. Giving younger kids opportunities to take calculated risks and problem-solve while the consequences are less severe will help them develop the skills to go out into the world, even if their decisions aren't always what you'd like to see.

When my daughter was almost seven, we went to Disney World. We visited Tom Sawyer's Island, a raft-only access play area for kids. I decided it was safe enough for her to explore a bit on her own, which thrilled her. She knew my cell number by heart, and we agreed that if she got scared, she could ask someone to call me (we have always suggested approaching a woman with kids if she needs help), which is exactly what she did: I came around a corner to see her asking another mom if she could use her phone. So empowering for her! Rather than teaching her to fear strangers, or not trust her gut or her voice, she learned to feel confident speaking up, and to advocate for her own comfort and needs.

Risk-seeking behaviours are an important part of adolescent development. It allows kids the opportunity to develop independence, improve reasoning skills, and assess consequences. Harm reduction principles aim to reduce risky behaviours and the negative outcomes associated with them. These principles emphasize shared decision-making and highlight the importance of empathy in hopes of fostering healthy relationships and communication between parents and their adolescents. •