

Being Brave - Teaching your Child to be Brave

We all want our children to be safe and happy. Most of us will actively protect our children from harm and, rightly or wrongly, from stressful, tricky, awkward, embarrassing and difficult situations.

Our comfort zone is so named for a good reason. It's not a hard place to be. But what are we doing for our children when we prepare every place they need to be ahead of time, to ensure their comfort? We have heard some interesting expressions around this, for example, 'lawn mower' parenting' (making sure there are no bumps or surprises on the path ahead; and 'curling' parenting (a reference to the winter Olympic sport of curling where the competitors madly sweep the ice around the puck to make sure it has a smooth unhindered arrival at its destination).

While we are busy 'lawn mowing' or 'curling', our children are not learning to be brave or independent. Resilience is stifled, and the development of anxiety becomes a real risk.

Our children need a courageous spirit to enable them to adjust to the many challenges which necessarily accompany growing up. For this spirit to develop it is important for your children to learn how to feel uncomfortable (we are not suggesting that this is the same as sitting comfortably when they are in danger).

A child who does not know how to cope with discomfort is more likely to become avoidant as their world expands, and to suffer from anxiety. As their world naturally becomes bigger and bigger, the comfort zone of an anxious child becomes relatively smaller and smaller.

We want our children to have the courage to put their hand up in class, both to ask a question and to risk giving the wrong answer. We want them to be prepared to volunteer for a task or a team, to stand up to a bully or for someone being bullied, to try new things, to have a go when they don't know how, to conquer the monsters lurking under the bed, to sleepover at Nanna's house and to be OK when you are not there.

We hope that some of the following tips may be helpful in encouraging your child to be brave. The list is not exhaustive, but we hope you get the idea.

- Use empowering language with your children. Encourage them when they succeed, of course, but reassure them that they are OK when they fail.
- Actively listen to your children and take their fears and concerns seriously, neither over-reacting nor ignoring them.
- Reflect and validate what they are feeling and reassure and comfort them. Instead of saying, 'There's nothing to be afraid of,' ask them what worries them. Maybe they are missing a piece of key information that you can easily provide.
- Use reassuring phrases that validate their fear like, 'You're worried because you don't know what to expect;' 'You're worried about how you will do', then reassure them that it is the trying that is important

- Many children will tell you that being brave means not being scared. Teach them that when trying something new, or taking a chance, being brave means doing it WHEN you are scared. If it's not scary, no bravery is involved. Teach them that meeting new challenges is scary and that is what makes an adventure. Waiting until they are no longer scared means they may miss out on an exciting adventure or learning something new.

Your children will look to you for clues: 'Should I be scared here?' Unless there is real and present danger, of course, be encouraging: 'Wow this looks challenging. Have a go. I'm right here.' Your own reaction to a given situation will guide them. Try, wherever possible, to show your faith in your child's ability.

Remind them of times they have been scared in the past; times when they have tried something new, even failed at first and then conquered, for example, riding a bike, going down a big slide, playing goalie, joining the tennis team, presenting a project to the class, performing in the eisteddfod or sleeping over at a friend's house.

Finally, lead by example. Allow your children to witness you stepping out of your comfort zone. Be their hero. You don't have to bungee jump to do this. Show them you are not afraid of what other people think. Go down the slide or ride a scooter at the park with them. How often do you feel yourself cringe and think, 'I feel silly. But what will people think?,' or refuse to have a swim with your children, as much as you'd love to, because you are worried about being seen in your swimmers. Sometimes being brave means simply being prepared to feel silly.

We could be doing a lot worse than reading the works of A.A. Milne to our children. It is full of wonderful wisdom. We will share with you today one of our favourite quotes. You might like to say it to your children. Often.

'You are stronger than you seem, braver than you believe, and smarter than you think you are.'

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver

SMC Counsellors

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au