

Lessons from the Ski Hill: Helping Too Much?

By Ann Brunette, MSW, Doll & Associates

Last weekend we took our family downhill skiing. It was a test of organization, patience and persistence for all of us. The most interesting insight of the day was found in trying to teach our eight-year-old son to ski. He tends to get nervous easily and is not always the most persistent. Confidence does not come easily.

So, we embarked on the bunny hill. While I grew up skiing, teaching kids to ski was not a natural. Because of his fear, our son held tightly to his dad as he tried to stay upright on his skis. Upright might be a stretch, as he was often putting most of his weight on dad and did not feel capable of standing on his own skis for fear of falling and getting hurt. The fear did not allow him to find his balance and strength. He just put his weight on his dad which did not give him the confidence to learn to balance on his own. As he leaned on dad, there was fear and frustration in his voice. The frustration could also be seen on his dad's face. After about two runs like this down the bunny hill, we realized that this technique was not working.

It was my turn to try. Recognizing that allowing him to put all of his weight on another person did not work, I tried "tough love." I was close by, but did

not let him use me. I tried to tell him a little bit about how to turn, slow down, and even how to fall without getting hurt. As he slowly began to get his sense of balance, his confidence increased. Despite several falls and a little help getting up, he did not lose confidence when he fell. Instead, he learned to get up on his own.

It was amazing to see the transformation. Trying to tell him which ski to put his weight on in order to turn seemed futile. I just stayed close by and allowed him to get a feel for it. He actually seemed to have a natural ability to balance, turn and slow down. When he began going somewhat fast, as long as I helped him not panic, he was able to slow himself down. If I panicked, he tended to as well. If I tried to grab him to stop him from falling, we both ended up on the ground. By lunch time he was going up the tow rope on his own and skiing faster than this mom was comfortable with! He, on the other hand, loved it.

The lesson that hit home for me that day was the importance of not getting in our children's way when they are learning and growing. Yes, we need to guide. Yes, we need to teach them the basics. Yes, we need to be close by to help

Agnesian HealthCare Behavioral Health Services

St. Agnes Hospital

430 E. Division Street
Fond du Lac, Wisconsin 54935
(920) 926-4205

Doll & Associates

40 Camelot Drive
Fond du Lac, Wisconsin 54935
(920) 907-8201

Psychiatric Associates

200 Front Street, Suite 3D
Beaver Dam, Wisconsin 53916
(920) 885-2780

agnesian.com

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continued on next page

continued from previous page

when they fall. Of course I would not have allowed my eight-year-old to go down a double black diamond hill the first time he tried skiing; that would not have been safe. Giving him the option of leaning on us so much that he lost hope in his ability to find his own balance was not good for him either. (It wasn't great for us either!)

Our children often teach us the lessons of life. Our lesson on the ski hill that day was: challenging our children to do more than we think they can is a good idea whether in skiing or in life. Allowing them to lean on us so much that they think they can't do things on their own is a set up for failure and lack of confidence.

Finding balance in parenting

I think all parents have faced the dilemma of how to balance being there to help our children when they fall, and allowing them to fall so they can either learn how to avoid falling or how to get up after a fall. We want to be there for our children, but it seems that more and more we may be overestimating how much they "need" us. Too much help leads to lack of confidence and we end up taking too much responsibility for the child. We, as parents, might feel good because we "helped" them, but what are they really learning? Teaching them that they are responsible for their choices is key to growing productive, confident kids.

John Gottman, PhD, talks about being our children's emotional coach. The idea is that we are there to guide and mentor our children, but that we encourage them to do the real work of their life.

An important part of what helps kids increase self-confidence, improve school performance, become physically healthier and improve their social relationships is to help them regulate their emotions. The biggest challenge we found on the ski hill that day was to help our son not give into the fear of going down the hill and falling. He needed to learn that he could face that fear and do it on his own. He did not have to let fear get in his way.

In "Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child," Gottman helps parents become more aware of their child's emotions, recognize that expression of emotions is an opportunity for closeness and learning, and validate and label the child's feelings so he or she can also understand them. Finally, he helps parents coach their children to solve issues and not allow emotions like fear, frustration, envy, anger and sadness to get out of control. By doing this, we allow for children to feel the emotions, but we help them handle them responsibly and effectively.