



From crib diving to tree climbing, some kids live to give their parents gray hair. Turns out, that's a good thing!

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A wild grin spread slowly over

LIMITS

PUSHING

then 10-year-old Cole's face. He'd spotted his chance to fly—a natural jump at the bottom of a snowy Midwestern hill—and he wasn't about to pass it up. "I barely had any time to react as he beelined straight for the ramp of snow," recalls his mom, Angela McElroy, of Dorr, MI, who has seen that look all too many times. Racing down the hill, Cole hit the jump so fast he shot into the air like a rocket before landing with a crash. "As he lay there motionless," says McElroy, "time stopped for me." But as her mind flashed to the night spent in the ER after bike tricks went wrong and worse, Cole slowly got to his feet. He was a little bruised and shaken but okay. Afterward, Cole talked about it, but he didn't say he was giving up snowboarding for good. "I'm going to get the angle different next time," he enthused. (Which he did, perfectly, on the family's next ski outing.) And although she was horrified to watch his fall, McElroy now looks back on it as a great learning experience: "He got a better sense of speed and balance, and he did it when I was around and ready to help."

In the context of our current bubble-wrapped world of parenting, antics like Cole's may seem downright scary. But in fact, this particular kind of risky play—climbing trees, practicing skateboard stunts, racing bikes fast—is not only normal, it's an essential part of healthy development. We're not talking about so-called clinical daredevils or truly dangerous thrill seekers who leap off the roof or take the family car for an underage joyride. Instead, "it's the kind of everyday exciting play where there's a *chance* of physical injury," says Mariana Brussoni, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist and injury prevention researcher at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver. "Kids describe a scary, funny feeling. It's the possibility of danger that can make it so exhilarating."

And the thrill they get from taking that chance packs a host of benefits, notes Dr. Brussoni—from reducing obesity by getting kids to put down their gadgets to increasing kids' resilience in the face of setbacks. (Go get 'em, Cole!) But the opportunity for kids to engage in this kind of wild fun is fast disappearing as anxious parents focus on preventing even the minor injuries once assumed to be part of childhood, according to a review of research published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* last year. "What's now characterized as risky play didn't have a name a generation ago," says Dr. Brussoni. "It was just what kids did." (Guilty here: In my own free-range childhood, I wandered the woods for hours unattended, something I never allowed my own two kids to do.) The result, experts worry, is that in the name of caution

we are preventing kids' healthy growth. But, luckily, there are ways to—safely—have the best of both worlds.

It's Only Natural

From babyhood on, kids learn about their world through physical play. "I hear from lots of parents about toddlers who want to climb everywhere," says Roy Benaroch, M.D., an Atlanta-area pediatrician and author of *Getting the Best Health Care for Your Child*. Rambunctious play is a way kids gain, through trial and error, the physical skills they will need to negotiate the big world—how to run, jump, balance, even fall safely. It's all crucial preparation for adulthood: "It's better to learn that wet pavement is slippery when you are running, not when you first get behind the wheel of a car," says Dr. Brussoni.

Risky play also has evolutionary benefits, argues Ellen Sandseter, Ph.D., a professor of early-childhood education research in Norway, who has published dozens of papers on the topic. It gradually exposes kids to challenging events so they can learn to face them without fear. (Climbing trees, for example,

HELP FOR FRAIDY-CATS

One of your kids is doing double gainers off the trampoline. The other is eyeing the contraption from a wary distance. Here's how to (gently) encourage cautious kids to take chances, and reap their benefits too:

ADJUST YOUR EXPECTATIONS. Not every kid is fearless, and that's okay. You don't want to push too hard—just help them stretch a little. "Risk-taking comes in many forms," says Ken Carter, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at Emory University. "Even trying a weird new flavor of ice cream can be a risk."

DON'T BELITTLE THEIR FEAR. Avoid saying things like "There's nothing to be afraid of." Their feelings are very real to them. Ask what exactly they're worried about, suggests Jim Taylor, Ph.D., a psychologist from San Francisco. "If a new skier says, 'I might fall,' you could say, 'Sometimes falling can be kind of fun. What you need to learn is how to do it safely!'" Then help her practice.

LET THEM TAKE BABY STEPS. If you're at the amusement park, he might want to go on the teacup ride a few times before giving the roller coaster a try. "If they have success, they may be willing to take a next step," says Philadelphia-area psychologist Tamar Chansky, Ph.D. Or he may want to just watch other laughing kids on the roller coaster for a while—that's an important step too: "Anxious kids have a tendency to want to avoid the situation entirely. That will just solidify their fear because there are no facts to challenge it."

Hang back. Don't dive right in to rescue your kid from a tricky spot on the climbing structure. If you wait a moment, your child will likely find her own way down. "Pretend to have glue in your pockets," suggests Dr. Sandseter—be slow to reach out, and let her solve the problem herself. The idea is to expose kids to small risks so they can gain experience. "Let them learn the lesson when the lesson is small," McElroy says. "When they get bigger, the risks they face get bigger too."

Assess hazards. Dr. Brussoni distinguishes between "risks" and "hazards." Risks are situations kids can reasonably evaluate before making their own decisions: "I think I can reach that next rung." Hazards are dangers a child cannot be expected to be aware of or handle: a swingset's rotten foundation, a river's powerful current, rocks at the bottom of a sledding hill. It's crucial you suss these out to protect your child.

Cool your own jets. If your child sees you looking nervous as she attempts a new feat, that sends the message that it's a scary situation (even if it may not be). Change your inner dialogue, suggests Tamar Chansky, Ph.D., a psychologist near

Develop a ritual. For younger adrenaline lovers, 3 and up, it can help to have a routine if you'll be heading to an exciting situation like a water park and you want to remind revved-up kids of safety rules. "First, get their attention: Physical routines often work well with these high-energy kids," says Dr. Chansky. "You could do a couple of jumping jacks together or clap hands with him a few times." Then review the safety rules: We walk; we don't run. "Sure, you might have to sit them down for a break if they forget, but praise them when they do use good judgment."

Insist on the right equipment and safety training. Make sure your child has a properly fitted helmet and other standard safety equipment. "If your 7-year-old is begging for a skateboard, get her into a camp or clinic so she can learn safe practices," suggests Dr. Taylor. "Give her the skills to do it safely."

Channel their energy in safe ways. With kids who veer toward actual daredevil activities, you can help them find safer, more structured outlets that still provide the same kind of excitement, advises Dr. Benaroch. Younger kids might like a

"When we ask parents to recall their own favorite play memory, it's not on the playground," says Dr. Brussoni. "It's playing in

reduces the fear of heights, research has found.) "If you are not allowed to confront these scary situations through play as a child, you could end up with anxieties as an adult," Dr. Sandseter says. That's because if kids constantly have an adult telling them when to stop or when to go, they don't have a chance to develop an inner instinct for their own limits or confidence in their own decision-making, Dr. Sandseter adds. That can leave them with all sorts of worries when they get older.

None of this is to say, however, that parents should abandon common sense. "Kids should be allowed to play, but that doesn't mean they never need supervision," says Dr. Benaroch. But before you worry that without your eagle eye, they'll be juggling knives in the backyard, take heart in knowing that most kids approach risk-taking in a step-by-step way, says Dr. Sandseter. They push a little further each time, motivated by the incremental successes. Indeed, my son Ethan spent one whole summer attempting progressively more harrowing flips off the diving board at our local pool. Even though I could see his skills developing, I still sat on a lounge chair Googling "skull fracture" when he wasn't looking.

Ethan survived—and by pushing himself, learned something important. "Risk-taking kids are always challenging themselves and are not afraid to get out of their comfort zone," says Jim Taylor, Ph.D., a psychologist in San Francisco and the author of *Positive Pushing: How to Raise a Successful and Happy Child*. Cheryl Hullihen, of Vineland, NJ, has witnessed this with her own bold daughters, Lauren, 6, and Sarah, 11. "Last summer, Lauren was finally old enough for her own boogie board during our annual summer vacation at the beach. Once she ran into the ocean for the first time, she never looked back," recalls Hullihen. "She took lots of tumbles off of her board, but she always got up

again. Many people commented on how she was so fearless riding in the big waves. At first my girls' adventures made me a little nervous. But it didn't take long before I realized how confident they've become."

Putting It In Perspective

Many parents begin to let go of their worries once they see their child's skills improve, but it also helps to look at the cold, hard facts: "Childhood is much safer than it's ever been," says Dr. Benaroch, thanks to such advancements as increased use of helmets and safer playground equipment. One study found that injuries decreased by 36 percent when 86 Canadian schools installed better playground equipment. Plus, a 2015 review of studies encompassing more than 50,000 children found that the vast majority of injuries from so-called risky outdoor play required little or no medical treatment. "When kids do get hurt playing outside, it's not usually serious," says Dr. Benaroch. "Even if a kid needs some stitches, he will heal just fine."

What they may not recover from so well? Missing out on the joys of childhood. "When we ask parents to recall their own favorite play memory, it's not on the playground," says Dr. Brussoni. "It's playing in an abandoned ditch or getting briefly, thrillingly, lost in a forest."

Encouraging Healthy Risks

"I often suggest nervous parents start with one thing they can do to give their child a little more autonomy," says Dr. Brussoni. This helps kids get adjusted in a more gradual way too. Here are several ways you can loosen the reins a little, without just opening the back door and hollering "Go for it!"

Philadelphia and the author of *Freeing Your Child From Anxiety*. "You are watching your child scale the monkey bars and you're thinking, 'We are going to end up in the ER!' Ask yourself, what are the facts? It's not like you see ambulances at every playground." Or reframe what you are seeing, as I did when my son was back-flipping at the pool: "He's getting so much better!"

It can also help to recall the harrowing high jinks you somehow managed to survive, suggests Dr. Brussoni. (Among my own bona fides: jumping off a one-story rock ledge into a bog to practice Wonder Woman moves, leapfrogging onto our sharp-hooved Shetland pony's back, and building a secret fort in the woods with a "borrowed" ax—all before my first day of junior high. And I was the quiet, bookish type.)

Leave "no" for the big stuff. A lot of parents follow kids around, repeating "Be careful!" as if it were a magical incantation. "This is not helpful from an injury-prevention standpoint," says Dr. Brussoni. When we interfere incessantly, kids can start second-guessing themselves, get distracted, or tune us out completely. "If you want to give a warning, make it very precise: 'Watch out! There's a stick coming straight for your head!'" she suggests. In deciding to step in, weigh the possible consequences of your child's actions: Are we talking a skinned knee? Or paralysis? That's McElroy's philosophy with Cole: "He knows when Mom says no, it must really be important," she says.

That's because you're still the parent here. If you don't think your child is developmentally ready for something ("But all my friends get to!!"), it's your job to say no. "If your child wants to walk to school alone, you can say 'That's a big step, let's practice shorter trips first,'" says Nancy Eppler-Wolff, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and coauthor of *Raising Children Who Soar: A Guide to Risk Taking in an Uncertain World*.



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karate class or gymnastics. Tweens might want to try skiing or rock climbing (check out our story, "School of Rock," on page 75). Dr. Sandseter's study of 360 teens found that those who did high-stakes sports such as kayaking and rock climbing were less prone to speeding, vandalism, and other forms of antisocial risk-taking. Another benefit: "Oftentimes, daredevil kids will listen to their coach's safety advice when they won't to their parents," says Dr. Taylor.

So the next time you find your child a little too far up in that tree, take a deep breath and realize what is actually happening: You're just catching a glimpse of him heading to a healthy, happy adulthood. ♦