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Why Being Less Protective Is Better for Your Kids

Call off the rescue! You can't protect your kid from every hard knock life hands out — and here's why you shouldn't.



Several years ago, my daughter lost a big basketball game — the final tournament game of the season, which would have put her seventh-grade team in the medals. Afterward, walking to the car, she wept openly in a way she hadn't since she was 3. She was already as tall as I am. We gimped along with my arm over her shoulder. "I suck!" she sobbed. It was excruciating to see her suffer like this. The urge to march back into the gym and *do something* was enormous. Some of the calls made by the ref had been lousy; I could get the bad calls overturned! I could flip open my cell and sign her up for an upcoming basketball camp! I could buy her some new sneakers. Or, I could do the hardest thing of all: hug her, listen to her, tell her I understood — but ultimately, do nothing.

What mom doesn't recognize this impulse to swoop in and make it all better? There are so many things that people forget to tell you about being a mother, and this is one of them: When our children suffer, so do we. And we suffer on a variety of levels. We remember our own bruised knees and skinned heart, and want to spare our children the same pain. And while part of us knows that sometimes, being a good mother means allowing them to fall off their bikes and to make friends with children who we suspect in our hearts will hurt them one day, the protective Mama Bear in us objects. And so we struggle within ourselves: Do we barge in and save our kids, or do we stand back and allow them to experience life's hard knocks?

Why We Rescue

It's been oft-noted that mothers today are busier and more accomplished than ever. We not only bring home the bacon, but we also comparison-shop for the best price on it, cook it up in a pan we then scrub out ourselves, and use it in a potato salad for the PTA potluck we hold in our spotless home. We're sensitive companions to our husbands, tireless cheerleaders for our children, 5 a.m. power walkers. We are determined that our kids experience lives that are interesting, fulfilling, *and* high in fiber.

It's ironic that many of *our* mothers — who lived more circumscribed lives and were viewed by both men and society as soft and in need of protection — were tougher chicks than we are when it comes to raising children. A generation or two ago, mothers were expected to keep a clean house, put dinner on the table, and give birth. They weren't expected to run alongside their son's bike holding the handlebars, as one mother I know does, afraid that her sixth-grader might fall and knock out a tooth. They didn't call the mothers of girls who hosted slumber parties to which their daughters weren't invited, trying to wrangle a last-minute invitation. Our mothers knew something that we seem to be in the act of forgetting: Life can be tough, and the sooner children learn this, the better off they may be.

Leaping in to solve our children's predicaments or to make them feel better, rather than allowing them the time it takes to work through the issue and the full sweep of their emotions, deprives them of the opportunity to figure out how to manage their feelings during tough times. Just as learning a sport demands years of practice, so does learning to handle life's setbacks.

Perpetual Mom Motion Machines that we are, however, it seems we're all too busy to think straight — and have lost the distinction between being an empathetic, nurturing mother and being a rescuer who regularly puts herself between her kids and disappointment, failure, heartbreak, or a scraped elbow.

Whether it's in our genes or the way we've been socialized, women seem to be predisposed toward nurturing, protecting, and sometimes rescuing. "It's safe to say that most mothers have a strong nurturing instinct; they hate to see their loved ones in pain," says John McGrail, Ph.D., a clinical hypnotherapist based in Los Angeles. "The problem occurs when they allow this instinct to override the knowledge that pain and disappointment are a natural part of the human experience and that children who learn how to deal with this side of life turn into well-adjusted adults."

So part of our impulse to butt in may be a natural extension of our nurturing, and part of it may be an outgrowth of millennial moms' can-do proactivity: Doing "everything" has come to include protecting our children from life's realities.

Our zeal may also be an outgrowth of something a little less benign. Moms stumble when they start looking at the happiness of their family as a measure of their own success, contends Mary M. Byers, author of [The Mother Load: How to Meet Your Own Needs While Caring for Your Family](#). "Many women mistakenly believe that if everyone in the family isn't happy, then they are failing in their jobs as mothers," she says. This is perhaps nowhere truer than for women who have given up jobs they enjoyed in order to stay home with their kids. They've done what they feel is the right thing for their family, *so everyone had better be happy*.

It's a noble but tricky sacrifice. Women may attempt to sublimate the grief they feel about the loss of their old, more independent life by trying to achieve the impossible: happiness for all of the kids (not to mention the husband), all of the time. And this self-interested selflessness can carry a very high price — for both mother and child.

Take the quotidian realm of homework. While it's true that many parents are overinvolved in their child's academic life because they want her to have a shot at Harvard (or even the best state school with a scholarship to be had!), more often than not we get into the homework act because Joshy's been messing around in class and lost track of the major science project due tomorrow. Now he's frustrated and mad at himself and maybe weepy. It's unhappiness of his own making, but what does Mom do? She stays up until midnight "helping" him throw together a project so he can avoid the failure or humiliation he rightly deserves (and would never forget). But rushing to fix our kids' problems and do their work for them doesn't serve them.

How Helping Can Hurt

Most of us are not misguided enough to think that if our son is totally crushed because he isn't invited to some popular kid's birthday party, racing to the mall to buy him a cool new skateboard will instantly cheer him up. Yet sometimes it's impossible to resist the impulse — and all too easy to convince yourself that it can't do your child any harm.

But it can: When you rush in immediately to alleviate your kid's discomfort, you rob him of the chance to conclude, all on his own, that things really are going to be all right. "This rescue bypasses the child's need to learn about handling disappointment," explains Tina Tessina, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist in Long Beach, CA. "He'll learn that a quick fix — in this case, buying something — is the pathway out of pain."

This rescue reflex can be pervasive. A woman who shields her children from feeling disappointment and frustration might do the same for her husband, and in some cases aging parents, wayward siblings, or needy friends. "A woman who is a rescuer rescues everyone in her family," says Debbie Mandel, author of [Addicted to Stress](#). "Everyone lines up, even the dog, looking to her for help and contentment. But managing other people's happiness is stressful and draining. When you're in an airplane, they always tell you to put on your own oxygen mask first, because if you pass out, so will those for whom you are responsible."

Sure, this sounds like smart advice, but most of the women I know don't believe it. A colleague of mine who's always on the verge of complete emotional exhaustion said to me once, "I know I'm supposed to consider my needs, but my need is to take care of my family." For her, "take care of" meant fix it, whatever *it* is. For everyone. Ironically, she became so wrung-out trying to keep everybody happy that she wound up making her family *unhappy* because she was always so overextended and irritable.

What Wise Women Know

Still, the question remains: What are you supposed to *do*, then, when your baby — and they are forever our babies, aren't they? — is hurting and you know you *could* just march right in and make things right again in a matter of minutes or hours?

"Give yourself some time before acting," advises Debra Gilbert Rosenberg, the author of [Motherhood Without Guilt](#). "Count to 10 or 100, leave the room, or call a friend before leaping in." Also, analyze whether you genuinely have any control over or even any role in the situation, says Rosenberg. If you were out of the country, would your child still have been excluded at recess? If you were out of the country, would the kid who was mean to your kid still have been mean? If the answer is yes, then the problem has absolutely nothing to do with *you*, and it's not your job to fix things. It is your job to offer your child love and support, listen and listen some more — and then not act.

A friend of mine, a mother of four who nevertheless always seems relaxed and more or less happy with her life, says something similar. Her policy is to wait as long as possible before sending out the posse. If one of her children seems to be suffering for much longer than the setback warrants, she'll look into the situation. "Otherwise," she says, "I tell myself they'll get over it. No one ever died from not getting to sit with the popular crowd at school."

There's a hidden message in this advice that bears mentioning: Riding out these setbacks takes time. One of the less pathological reasons we become fix-it moms is that, typically, rescuing is simply faster than offering support and letting the crisis of the moment play itself out. Being truly helpful to your son or daughter means being receptive — a quaint, old-fashioned feminine virtue. And being receptive to a child struggling through the loss of a big game, or a snubbing by a friend, will wreak havoc with your schedule, possibly for days on end. Like potty-training your child or getting her to sleep in her own bed, it's another passage of motherhood that you just cannot be prepared for. But in the end, being a less protective mom and a more supportive one will teach both you and your child priceless lessons in life and love.

READERS REVEAL: "How I Learned to Back Off"

These moms discovered the hard way that coming to their kid's rescue isn't always such a hot idea.

My oldest child is 12, and when he was in third grade, he was being picked on. One time, he was invited to a birthday party at a movie theater. I watched children call my son names, and when he sat in the row with other boys, they got up and moved. I asked the boys if they realized how mean they were being and how they would like it if it were happening to them. I also spoke to some of their parents. My son was made fun of even more that year because of what I did, and he resents my actions. I also learned that *he* didn't take their words personally — I did! Now I have learned to let my children have their own lives. If they ask me to step in, I'll be there — but only if they ask. —*Dianne Sikel, 39, Phoenix*

My fifth-grader, Max, thought he'd win his classroom spelling bee — but he didn't. He said that he had started out spelling the "a-s-s..." in the word *assumption* but got distracted when a boy in the class started snickering. Max said he tried to start over but the teacher wouldn't let him. I immediately emailed the teacher to ask why, and he said Max had *not* tried to start over. Then it dawned on me that Max had made up the "trying to start over" bit. I learned that I shouldn't make the *assumption* that my child is telling the truth about unfairness at school without first checking with the teacher, and I shouldn't fire off an email based on

the emotions of the moment. —*Debbie Withers, 47, McDonough, GA*

When my son, Brock, was 5, he entered a tae kwon do tournament; his part was to perform a "tiger" routine. When it was his turn, he got up with his group — and forgot everything he'd learned. He was so disappointed. As we left the building, I was obsessing about what I could do to protect his little psyche. But by the time we got to our car, Brock was chattering on about an airplane in the sky. He'd already forgotten about the tournament! The experience was just a brief blip in his day. It was a *much* bigger deal to me than to him, and if I'd taken action to "protect" him, I would have made the experience much worse and more memorable — in a bad way — for him. —*Emily Auchard, 47, San Anselmo, CA*

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