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Safety and Relationship-Based Care by Mary O'Connell

The Wisconsin licensing procedures for group daycare are pages and pages long, and of the thousands of rules and regulations, most are regarding safety. I remember when, as a new director, I was looking through the regulations with our licensing specialist and exclaimed about how many rules there were, and expressed concern that I would never get to know all of them well enough to make sure our center was in compliance. She looked over her reading glasses at me and said gravely, "Just remember, for every rule that's in this book, something happened to a child." Indeed, every accident that occurs somewhere in the state seems to prompt the implementation of another new rule.

Stories like this one [the paper had reported on the death of a child in childcare] shake me to my inner core, and are a potent reminder that caring for other people's children is serious business. How do we reassure parents that their child is safe when they drop him or her off at LifeWays in the morning? Can we promise them that nothing bad will ever happen to their son or daughter while in our care? No, we really can't. But we also can't give in to the gripping fear that tends to accompany a "what if" mentality.

The Safety of Relationship-based Care

It was exactly this dilemma that I faced two years ago when I sat down to write a letter to our center's parents to reassure them in the wake of another child's death in a Milwaukee area childcare center not related to LifeWays. What could I say to these parents that would honor the trepidation they must feel about handing over their precious child to another adult each day, yet assure them that their little one is safe in our care? As I pondered what to write, I gazed out the window at the children and their caregivers playing outside. I watched as one caregiver had her group of children outside in the clearing, an area of the nature preserve that allows the children to run, climb on fallen tree trunks, and build forts with branches. There is no fence in this area; when a caregiver takes the children out to the clearing, extra vigilance is required. I watched as the children enjoyed varying degrees of freedom in their play. Since this caregiver had the same group of children in her care every day, and had gotten to know them over a period of years, she knew which children could venture a little further away and which ones had to be kept within arm's length. One toddler stayed close, playing near her caregiver, practicing her new walking skills on the challenging uneven terrain. I noticed that sometimes she would begin to toddle too far away, and as though there were an invisible string between them, the caregiver would sense this even while she was helping another child with something, and gently call the little one back. It was remarkable to watch this group of children freely explore and yet respect and understand the boundaries set by their caregiver. I then realized the truth about safety... it was the relationship between caregiver and child, developed over a period of months and years together, that really kept the children safe. Of course we follow the licensing rules and have systems in

place such as head counts and attendance logs, but what really provides a safety net for each child in our care is the fact that LifeWays provides relationship-based care.

As I drive through the city, I see signs for childcare centers posted on vans and billboards promising a whole host of conveniences for the working parent. Twenty-four-hour childcare, barber services, swimming lessons and child pick-up and drop-off are among the list of promised services to entice parents to enroll their child. The reality is the more conveniences we offer, the more adults we have taking part in the care of the child; therefore the weaker the relationship between adult and child, and the less control we have over the child's safety. For example, we have had a number of children enrolled over the years who have food allergies, some of them severe. The few times that we've had an incident of a child being served food to which he or she was allergic have always taken place when the child's regular caregiver is out for the day and there is a substitute. It is not that the substitute is careless or uninformed; it is that the child's food allergy is not living as strongly in that caregiver's consciousness as it is in the primary caregiver. This serves as a clear reminder that we need to keep the circle of adults who care for the child as small as reasonably possible to build and protect the relationships that keep the child safe and secure. When we are tempted to add services to increase enrollment, we must be careful not to put the convenience of the consumer ahead of the needs of the child.

Different Perspectives

Even in the context of relationship-based care, conflicts still arise around safety issues. Safety can be a "hot button" issue for those providing childcare. Licensing specialists, caregivers, and parents all have different expectations, life experiences, and points of reference that shape the way they think about safety issues in a childcare setting. It can be challenging to navigate through all of these differences and determine the best practices for the children.

If you've had a chance to sit down and look through the licensing regulations for Family or Group Day Care in your state, you've probably noticed that safety is the priority. When a state licensing representative visits your program, they are hoping to find the safest environment possible for the children. The same is true for the fire inspector and other government representatives who may regularly inspect daycare centers and home programs. Theirs is a world of *what ifs*, and the overriding theme of this world tends to be "minimize the risks by implementing and enforcing rules." It's important work and a very tough job, and you can imagine that if you focused all of your energy day-in and day-out on the enforcement of safety rules, you would probably prefer children be wrapped in bubble wrap and not allowed to take any risks at all! It's important for the childcare provider to try to understand the perspective of the individuals who represent these regulatory agencies, and to realize that we all have the same common goal: quality childcare.

As caregivers and nurturers, however, our focus is a bit different than that of the regulatory representatives. We know that for children to develop healthy and whole, they need to take reasonable risks. Children must be able to run, jump, and climb to develop body awareness, confidence, balance and agility. They must be given the freedom outdoors in nature to try things that might be a stretch for them, that might cause them to trip, stumble, or become frustrated. Adventurous play that challenges and excites children helps instill critical life skills.

Increasingly, however, ours is becoming a society of generalized fear. The legal landscape of publicized litigation and our general fear level since 9/11 have created a culture in which we as adults have lost perspective on what is healthy, reasonable risk-taking for a child. Compared to children raised a generation or two ago, the children of today play outside less and have fewer opportunities for playtime that is not under the constant watchful eye of the parent, teacher or coach. Parents are afraid to let their children enjoy the unsupervised outdoor play of their own childhood for fear a stranger will abduct them. When examined objectively, these fears are misplaced. About 115

children are kidnapped by strangers each year, according to federal statistics. 250,000 children are injured each year in auto accidents. In fact, the chances of a child being abducted by a stranger have decreased considerably over the past generation.

This generalized fear which has paralyzed our ability to give children the freedom to take chances, make mistakes and assume reasonable risks has become so pervasive, it has almost gone unrecognized. But experts in child development are beginning to take note of its effects. In the United States, The Alliance for Childhood has done much work recently to encourage parents to let their children play outdoors again. There is a growing discussion in the United Kingdom about the dangers of the phenomenon called "cotton wool parenting," and in the U.S. a new term has been coined: the "helicopter" parent – one who hovers constantly over his or her child. Play England, an agency that recently studied over one thousand children and their parents, found that while 70% of parents said their own greatest childhood adventures were among rivers, trees and woods, only 29% of today's children said their favorite play experiences were outdoors. Half of children ages seven to twelve have been forbidden to climb trees; 17% were not even allowed to play tag. Adran Voce, director of Play England, said, "Constantly wrapping children in cotton wool can leave them ill-equipped to deal with stressful or challenging situations they might encounter later in life. It's not the end of the world if a child has an accident."

New South Wales Commissioner for Children and Young People, Gillian Clavert, shares that today's parents are so fanatical about keeping their children safe, the medical field is seeing a steep rise in anxiety disorders among the very young, along with an accompanying reduction in motor skills from fewer opportunities to play. "Over the past ten years we have seen a real reduction in the range at which children can leave their family home and move freely. Research in state schools shows that children increasingly express fear of global threats such as war and terrorism, and have a general insecurity about their own future and their community's. These concerns mean they live life in a restrictive, guarded way, either as a result of restrictions imposed by others or themselves." Fearful children are likely to grow into fearful adults.

So, how do we as caregivers allow children to take the reasonable risks we know they need for their own healthy growth and development in this climate of fear? First, we must try to understand the perspective of the other adults in relationship to the child. I've already talked about the need to "get into the shoes" of the licensing representative. We also have to understand that, for many parents, being a good parent is synonymous with keeping their child as safe as possible. This is the message they have gotten from other parents, the media and their pediatrician. When we understand where they are coming from, it becomes evident that first and foremost we must assure the parent that we take the care and safety of their child seriously. I'm not talking about a well-rehearsed sentence during the parent tour, or a tagline at the bottom of the contract we've asked them to sign, but a real heart connection between caregiver and parent on behalf of the child. It is from this place of trust that we can begin a meaningful conversation with the parent about the child's need for play, reasonable risk, and adventure. Next, we can share with the parent all of the safety measures we do have in place to make sure that our trip into the woods or down to the river is well thought out, with a cell phone for the caregiver, first aid kit, and safety expectations of the children. Usually when parents feel we are taking the safety of their child seriously, they are thrilled and grateful for the opportunity for their child to connect with nature, gain independence and increase self-confidence.

Helpful Safety Tips

During a recent conversation in the LifeWays training, caregivers shared some things they do to ensure a safe environment in which children are free to explore:

- **Try not to put children in positions or situations that they can't get into and out of on their own.**

At LifeWays in Milwaukee we have a large boulder in the forest. Children are usually three years old before they are tall enough and strong enough to pull themselves up onto that boulder. Little ones try and try again until they are completely frustrated because they want to join the big kids on that rock. They will beg any well-meaning adult in the vicinity to pick them up and put them onto the boulder. The LifeWays caregivers will offer words of encouragement and support, but we will not lift a child onto the boulder; they must get onto the rock on their own. This may seem cruel to the outside observer. Why not just put them on the rock and make them happy? First of all, we've rarely, if ever, had a child tumble off the rock who climbed it on his own. Generally speaking, if he has the skills to get up, he can usually figure out a way to safely get down. A child who was simply placed there by an adult may not have the balance and agility to safely climb off and is more likely to fall. The same is true for tree climbing or other such skills. Secondly, this has turned into a true rite of passage at our center, as little ones eagerly await the day they too will be big enough to climb the rock. Once they have done it, they sit upon that boulder beaming with confidence and self-satisfaction. Why would we rob a child of that experience?

• **Resist the urge to "rescue."**

There are certainly times when children need us to come to their rescue, when they are in imminent danger and we must act quickly. But often adults come to children's aid too quickly or unnecessarily, and we can interfere with the child's learning process. There is value in allowing a child to experience frustration, or to figure out how to get out of a tricky situation. When the child yells for help, the wise caregiver takes a moment to assess the situation. Often the child just needs the caregiver to be near and offer encouragement as the child herself works through the problem. If a child has climbed a tree and is afraid to come down, the adult can offer suggestions, if needed, as to where the child can put her foot, her hand, and so forth until she is safely down. When the adult simply reaches up and plucks the child from the tree, the child views the adult as someone who has magical powers to fix situations that she herself does not have. This does little to empower the child that she has the ability to solve her own problems.

• **Set boundaries and expectations for the children.**

When taking children out into an unfenced area, like a neighborhood walk or a hike in the forest, caregivers have shared a variety of ways that they enlist the children's help in safeguarding themselves. Some tell the children that they must stay where they can see their caregiver. Others will set boundaries that the children cannot stray beyond (for example, the big pine tree, the driveway). One important expectation of the children is that they respond to the caregiver when their name is called, and that they come when asked to. The children will need some reminders of the expectations, and sometimes there must be consequences for not meeting those expectations. But in general, children have an amazing capacity for helping to keep themselves safe when we show them we are confident they can do so. Of course, we do this in the same matter-of-fact way that we introduce any expectations for a child, without the overlay of our adult fears or concerns. It would not be appropriate to say, "You must stay where I can see you or a stranger might come and take you away!" A simple, "Harry, can you still see me?" will suffice.

This article by Mary O'Connell was excerpted from Home-Away-From Home: LifeWays Care for Children and Families by Cynthia Aldinger and Mary O'Connell.

Mary was the founding director of LifeWays Early Childhood Center, a LifeWays Representative Program in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She is currently president of the LifeWays board and works as LifeWays Training Coordinator.



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