

No Way Out - And Loving It

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 25 August, 2003 - 23:00

What if children want to risk doing something that you think might be distressing for them? For example, what if they want to spend the weekend with their very coercive grandparents, or play with a neighbourhood child who is rather violent, or go to boarding school, or play Truth or Dare? *Based on a Fri, 7th April, 2000 TCS List post*

Sarah Fitz-Claridge (<http://www.fitz-claridge.com/>).

What if children want to risk doing something that you think might be distressing for them? For example, what if they want to spend the weekend with their very coercive grandparents, or play with a neighbourhood child who is rather violent, or go to boarding school, or play Truth or Dare?

The answer is that TCS parents:

1. try to ensure that their children know the risks, dangers, options, and so on (giving them as much information as they want to hear),
2. think ahead to what might go wrong, and make contingency plans,
3. ensure that the children have an escape from the situation in the event that they want that,
4. thoroughly support their children in their choice to take this risk,
5. if the children change their minds later, TCS parents then support them in that, helping them effect a rapid escape.

If Jane wants to go back-packing in the wilderness, for example, her parents will ensure that she understands the risks and make it possible for her to get out in the event that she wants to escape. They will equip her with a phone or radio, etc.

But what if the thing that the child wants to risk is *specifically* a matter of not being able to easily get out of the situation? What if Jane wants to go pack-packing in the wilderness *without* a phone or radio? What if she doesn't want an escape route?

It would be wrong to take such precautions against the child's will, so in that case, Jane's TCS parents would honour her wish *not* to have a phone or radio in her backpack.

If Jane wants to risk not being able to change her mind this is not necessarily a bad sign. No doubt there are many children in the world for whom such a choice is a product of irrationality, but it would be a grave mistake to assume that a TCS child making such a choice must have a Deep Psychological Problem or worse, to take it as evidence of <shudder> Coercion Damage and pack the child off to a 'therapist' (or take whatever Measures the parents consider to be the TCS equivalent of that).

It is not that Jane actively wants to be coerced, or to put herself in a state of coercion as TCS defines it. (That would indeed be a sign of irrationality.) What the child actually wants in such a situation is to create knowledge, and creating knowledge *always* involves risk, i.e. risk of coercion. Some risks in the pursuit of knowledge are more obvious than others, but all creativity, all knowledge creation, carries risk. That is why I often point out that “the risk-free life is no life at all”.

TCS parents should expect that there may be times when a child positively wants, as part of the experience, to risk not having a way out. And instead of second-guessing their child, or overriding her choice “for her own good” (or <ugh> because they think that TCS requires it), they should bend over backwards to facilitate her choice. (I am of course assuming here that the parents have non-coercively offered their best theories, arguments and concerns to the child.)

In most everyday risky situations (such as visiting the grandparents or playing with the child down the road) children do want and need a means of escape if things should go wrong, and arrangements do have to be made to provide this. But there certainly are times when having an instant way out would systematically prevent the very knowledge creation a child was seeking, and so would ruin the experience. Take the case I mentioned earlier, of having an exciting adventure camping in the wilderness without a phone in sight. Most people in that situation would consider themselves better off if they had a phone or a radio in their backpack so that they could call for help at any time. But for some, having a phone or a radio present could make the whole experience profoundly different, and so make the knowledge being created significantly less rich, complex and deep. It is like the difference between going white water rafting and going on a white-water rafting fairground ride. For some people, at some stages in their learning, that difference makes all the difference, one way or the other.

It is a bit like the difference between reality and virtual reality: sometimes virtual will not do. What children are doing when they are creating knowledge *is* virtual reality rendering in their minds, but sometimes this rendering, this knowledge creation, requires certain external risks to be real, and if they are merely pretend, the entire intricate rendering may be lifeless, and generate nothing of value.

 Taking Children Seriously

Footnote

Readers who are not familiar with the idea of virtual reality rendering in one's mind might like to read David Deutsch's book, *The Fabric of Reality* (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/014027541X/takingchildrseri>). In chapters 5 and 6, he discusses the relationship between virtual reality and ‘ordinary’ reality as part of the deep, unexpected structure of the world that this absolutely fascinating book is about. He explains that all reasoning, all thinking, and all external experience, are forms of virtual reality. He points out that just as a virtual reality generator must be able to override the normal functioning of the senses, in some sense, so do all techniques of representational art and long-distance communication. “Even prehistoric cave paintings gave the viewer some of the experience of seeing animals that were not actually there.” he says. “Today we can do that much more accurately, using movies and sound recordings, though still not accurately enough for the simulated environment to be mistaken for the original. [...] Imagination is a sort of virtual reality. But what may not be so obvious is that our ‘direct’ experience of the world through our senses is virtual reality too. [...] We realists take the view that reality is out there, objective, physical, and independent of what we believe about it. But we never experience that reality directly. Every last scrap of our external experience is of virtual reality. And every last scrap of our knowledge – including our knowledge of the non-physical worlds of logic, mathematics and philosophy, and of imagination, fiction and fantasy – is encoded in the form of programs for the rendering of those worlds on our brain's own virtual reality generator. So it is not just science – reasoning about the physical world – that involves virtual reality. All reasoning, all thinking, and all external experience, are forms of virtual reality.”

to post comments

Comments

More insanity

Submitted by Pokemamma on 3 September, 2003 - 12:40

If the kids wants to do something you think's going to be a problem, simply say no and save yourself all this sh*t. I take my kids plenty seriously and I wouldn't let them do something harmful.

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hmmm.

Submitted by surfnom on 3 September, 2003 - 18:39

Does your husband not let you do things he thinks are dangerous or immoral? I'm vegan (for moral reasons even), should I not allow my husband to eat ice cream or salmon? Perhaps, while he's at work, I should go and throw out all of his frozen fish and ice cream. While I'm at it, I'll throw out all of the eggs he bought for the children.

I don't know about you, but I know that I can be wrong about anything. How did you manage to always know what is right and best for everyone in your family? Tell me your secret please!

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Self-reliance is fundamental to a free society!

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 28 December, 2003 - 05:04

It's natural to want to know, if everything fell away, if all your life lines and protections fell through, that you could be self-reliant.

You see, since the great sub/Urbanization of our society, we removed from our childrens' developmental process important elements; to be able to remove themselves from familar surroundings if they needed to do so.. and more importantly to have a feeling of being their own person, apart from the masonry, mastery, and madness of the city.

It's a natural impulse and necessity for healthy self-identification and ego/mindstate development.

Why do think the military training is based on pushing you to your perceived limits and beyond? -- It pushes you to be extensively self-confident and self-reliant, if necessary, and in turn, it makes you understand the value of cooperation... and with people trained similarly, it serves of immense value in self-governance, organization, and effectivness.

Children able to "throw away the life jacket" or able to feel truly self-reliant at an early age or repeatedly throughout their childhood are in effect gaining self-knowledge that, nowadays, is only found and encourage in the military. (Why do they try to find them so young? -- For precisely this reason!)

Your misgivings aside, as a parent... the child is eminently better served by exposure and consequent adaptation to adversity than a forced lack of exposure thereto and a lack of developed compensatory ability therefrom!

Surely a child raised by wolves will be more able than one raised by sheep?

But this wisdom will be ignored... "for the children," no less...

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Surfmom, it must be pretty fr

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 25 October, 2004 - 14:30

Surfmom, it must be pretty frustating to be an ethical vegan and live with a husband and children that are meat eaters. How do you cope? Wouldn't you rather be with people that share your moral views? How is it like to not have any influence on the people that live with you?

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Negotiating distress

Submitted by Julie (not verified) on 5 January, 2005 - 19:50

Could Jane and her parents negotiate together until everyone is comfortable with the distress/anxiety level each person will feel while Jane is away? I think Jane's parents have emotional needs in this situation, too.

If I were Jane's parent, I wouldn't take any risks that would really scare her unless we talked it out first and made sure everyone was okay with it.

How much would it really hurt Jane to have a phone tucked away? I guess in a TCS family, people would care enough about each other and would be sensitive to those with problems, such as being a worrywart, to give in in a small way to promote the comfort of others. If I were Jane and knew my mom would suffer 10,000 nightmare scenarios when I was away, I'd just carry the phone but keep it turned off unless I needed it.

Just wanted to acknowledge a few more shades of grey here.

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I see...

Submitted by Karma (not verified) on 18 March, 2006 - 22:48

So TCS encourages throwing our children into potentially dangerous situations? What if there was an emergency, and Jane needed an ambulance? She wouldn't have a phone to call 911. That's unlikely to happen, but it is a risk. There is no harm in her carrying a phone even if she doesn't want to. Teaching your kids that they can have virtually anything they want simply because they want it, even if it hurts the emotions of others (in this case the worrying parents), is irresponsible parenting.

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no way out and loving it

Submitted by derek (not verified) on 9 April, 2006 - 20:54

If this situation was the other way around and the mother was out in the wilderness without a phone would'nt that be just stupid your loved ones are at a home and you have no way of contacting them without a phone or radio? i love the ideas of taking children seriously but sometimes they go to far There has to be common sense too/. i see the wanting to be independent thing and iam all for it and yes i would not force her to take the radio but i think there is something else to be considered here How do the parents feel when they know their daughter is out in the wilderness without a phone or radio why wouldpnt she bnaturally want to talk to them and give them a call to say Hi iam having a good or bad time i think a truly loving relationship with their daughter would only make it natural for her to want to phone home.

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Resonse to Karma and derek

Submitted by mammal_mama on 1 February, 2007 - 19:45

Riding in a car is a potentially dangerous situation.

Also, the article's not talking about "throwing" anyone into a potentially dangerous situation: it's talking about respecting the right of a young person to choose to take a risk.

As a mom, I'll feel I have a right to take more risks when my children are grown. In choosing to parent, I've chosen to be needed by my children -- and to therefore have obligations towards them that they don't have towards me.

Susan

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