

Dal News

Manageable risk

Is there such a thing as keeping kids too safe?

By Dawn Morrison - March 28, 2007

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"It's been fun," says Michael Ungar about the whirlwind of media interviews he's recently completed. An associate professor in the School of Social Work, Dr. Ungar has written a new book that's generating headlines across the country, including a February cover story in *Maclean's* magazine. (Read: [Q&A with Dr. Ungar in *Maclean's*](#).)



CONTROVERSIAL? Dr. Michael Ungar's research was *Maclean's* February cover story.

Too Safe For Their Own Good Ñ *How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive* elaborates Dr. Ungar's thesis that parents are misguidedly raising a generation of "bubble-wrapped children." It's an idea that's generating debate and discussion across the region and the country.

"We bubblewrap them in life jackets of programmed activities, larger and larger SUVs to shuttle them between those activities, and security cameras to watch them while they're there," says Dr. Ungar, the father of two children.

He adds that this approach can come with a price.

"We are overprotecting our kids to the point they feel unable to cope with life's challenges, because they've never had to deal with risk, responsibility or challenges of their own. Our excessive worry has become a risk factor for many children, denying them the same opportunities for adventure and responsibility we experienced when we were growing up."

Strength in adversity

With his 25 years in clinical psychology, Dr. Ungar's theories have their roots in studying children around the world who have suffered almost unimaginable adversity. The International Resilience Project (www.resilienceproject.org), based at Dalhousie, is looking at what makes children survive and even thrive despite enduring war, poverty, homelessness and abuse.

For parents, it's important to strike a balance between keeping our children safe, and offering them what they need to experience as part of the process of growing up, says Dr. Ungar.

One thing is for certain, and that is that solutions must begin with parents.

"To put it into context, I often ask parents 'What were you doing in terms of risk and responsibility and adventure-seeking behaviours when you were whatever age?' And then I ask them what they've learned from those experiences."

Readers Say

Eileen Murphy

March 29, 2007 10:22 AM

Amen, Dr. Ungar! I have been thinking this for years. However, not being a parent myself, I haven't been able to be very vocal about it. These overprotected kids who have never had to make choices or figure out how to spend their time are not turning out to be very well adapted young adults. Please parents, let your kids figure some things out for themselves! We all survived without seatbelts, helmets, with pregnant mothers who drank alcohol, smoked, didn't have a sonogram every time you turn around. Not that I'm advocating these things, just making a point. Relax and let your kids explore and enjoy!!

Ashley

March 30, 2007 2:40 AM

I'm not sure that pregnant woman smoking and drinking is the same as "manageable risk" for children. For one thing, isn't one of the reasons some risks are good for children that they learn to be responsible adults? Pregnant women are usually adults (one would hope) who should have learned (through manageable risk as children) to be responsible. I'm not sure the point was very well made.

Katrin Sommerfeld

March 30, 2007 9:16 AM

Thank you Dr. Ungar for this long overdue assessment. I am a mother of a 4 1/2 and 2 1/2 year old and although I try to make it as safe as possible for them, I have already realized that I can't be there in every situation no matter how much I try. I also realized I shouldn't because they DO have to learn themselves what's good for them and what not. I enjoyed a lot of freedom as a child and I want to pass it on to them. It is true that children also have to learn to choose their own activities and schedule part of their day themselves and we can start to teach them already at my kids age.

Shelley

January 6, 2009 2:40 PM

Wow - so true! As a single parent of 3, I have been what you call the overly-protective, protective parent. I have always had a burning need to know my children were safe and out of harm's way considering I was the only parent in their lives; however, I do realize being so overly protective can potentially be harmful to them in the sense that they do not get to make decisions and take responsibility for their actions. So one would wonder why I would continue to be so overbearing in protection. When I think about it, I know as a child I was limited to what I could do having been from a large family with strict parents, but that does not say that I was not afforded the time to figure things out myself. And get this, here I am still alive, healthy and I suppose, OK. I believe now is the time for me to let go of the apron strings and let my children fly – and really deep down, I know they can make it and they will grow to soar like Eagles!!! Thanks for allowing me to express myself and in some ways allowing me to get back my freedom from worry. Feeling I will open my eyes to watch what my children can do as appose to what I was afraid to let them do, is a truly liberating experience. Hopefully for all of us -- Thanks!

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