



ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students

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Is it Monday Yet? 11/28/22



When Does our Parental Urge to Protect become Over Protection?

Before I sign an incident report involving a student *ouchy* that occurred while playing during the school day, I always give parents a call just to check-in and see how their child is doing and to invite their thoughts about life on the playground. Recently, after hanging up from one of these calls, this parent's words "Just kids being kids..." and, "We can't cover them in bubble wrap," were echoing in my ears at the exact moment I started to ponder the topic for my December IIMY? article, and suddenly I realized I had my topic.

Over the course of my career, I've made 100s of these recess-related calls. Parent voices in response have run the gamut from fairly laid back, as in the voice above, to demands for increased supervision and calls for hazard mitigation studies of the given school's play structures. As varied as these voices have been, I have zero doubt that all have been shared with the intention of taking care of our children. During these same years, it felt like schools and parks were trying to outdo one another by offering playground features designed by the folks at Cirque du Soleil. These were also the years when my wife and I were helping to raise the children attending the boarding and day schools where we worked as colleagues, while also embarking on the adventure of raising three children of our own. Each time I made one of these calls, it was an opportunity for Eileen and me to reflect upon our own parenting.

Even during these early years of parenting our own children, I was certain Eileen and I could identify "underparenting" when we saw it, but the idea of *overparenting* sounded paradoxical. From my somewhat naive perspective at that stage of my history as a parent and educator, it seemed to me that one of the problems with the world was that not enough people took their parenting responsibilities *seriously enough* and that there could never be such a thing as *too much parenting*.

This is all to say that when my daughter Molly (now 22) was born, I was most definitely guilty of overparenting and may even have been what has come to be known as “a bubble wrap parent.” Feeling the weight of sudden and tremendous responsibility, it was only natural that Eileen and I would sail close to the shore in terms of our supervision of Molly’s activities, the selection of what she ate, gatekeeping who she played with, and choosing the activities she engaged in. As she grew older, technology helped us to remotely hover by allowing continuous monitoring of her whereabouts and access to us for her every question about anything at all times of the day or night. All of this made me feel like a very responsible parent, for a little while, at least.

Over the course of these early years, as the voices on the other side of the phone moved further and further from the chill “kids being kids,” and the pendulum swung towards increasingly extreme versions of my own position and beyond, I reflected more and more deeply on my philosophy that “there could never be such a thing as too much parenting,” and discovered a whole body of “too-much-of-a-good-thing” research that helped me to strike more of a balanced approach to my parenting and, consequently, create a healthier environment for my three children.

Don’t get me wrong: I am delighted that, as parents and educators, we are much more informed about how to keep our children safe. We are also better at identifying hazards and have more resources at our fingertips to help us avoid and/or respond to dangerous situations involving our children. And of course, this is the way it should be: after all, there is nothing more worthy of our protection and nothing more precious to us than our children. Our children are also more vulnerable than the members of any other age group because they are less aware of their surroundings; lack world experience; are less able to make the connection between cause and effect; and are smaller, physically weaker/less body aware, and almost entirely dependent upon adults. Naturally, with stakes this high, as loving adults who have taken on the responsibility of raising children, Eileen and I wanted to do everything we could to ensure the safety of our Molly, Zach, and Ethan.

Informed by all this, our development of a healthier parenting style was *gradual*, which is to say glacial, and we struggled with it. While we had no doubt that the shorter term goals of protecting our children would be met by our bubble wrap parenting, and our guts (and a growing body of research) told us that the downstream effects, longer term, would lead to diminishing returns, we found it difficult to let go. For parents I have spoken to lately about this topic, the idea of “letting go” is even more challenging as a result of the pandemic and the pause that this public health crisis gave us all to ruminate on the uncertainty of life. Add to this reports about bullying and student-on-student violence, the sheer terror of school shootings, the frightening ease of access our children have to a relentless onslaught of images and opinions that do not always have their best interests at heart, or the access that others have to them via this same medium, and bubble wrap parenting

seems to make perfect sense. In our own development in this arena, Eileen and I had a bit of a revelation that prompted our first effort at “letting go” when friends of ours we met through a parenting group, who had recently themselves managed to “let go,” nudged us to answer this question: “By bubble wrapping your children, whose needs are being met?” Even after this provocative question, it took us some time to “get comfortable being uncomfortable.” Letting go of binary absolutes was the first step; once we grew more comfortable with this, an entire universe of middle ground opened up and things got easier.

My children are now of the age where we look back and talk about their experiences as children growing up in our home, and they could tell you, almost to the date, when Eileen and I started loosening our hold. Over the years we spent reflecting on this topic, the voices of friends, colleagues, parents, and internet sources helped us to temper our sense of responsibility for the short term safety of our children with a bigger picture consideration of their overall development; it took a village! As we grew in our parenting and our children grew older, this letting go effort seemed more and more natural, and I am grateful that we started when we did. Throughout the literature, and there is a lot more out there these days, the following list is about as exhaustive as they get once one combs through what has been written about how overparenting negatively impacts the long term health of humans who are bubble wrapped as children; such adults are more likely to experience

1. Low Self-Esteem and Self-Worth
2. Anxiety and Depression
3. Shame and Doubt
4. Approval-seeking and People-pleasing Tendencies
5. Amplified Unhealthy or Depressed Healthy Risk-Taking Behaviors
6. Perfectionism
7. Insecure Attachment Style in Relationships
8. Reduced Authenticity and Honesty towards Self and Others

How can Ashbrook help?

In a very real way, families that have chosen to be at Ashbrook have already taken a significant step towards accessing resources that are known to support more balanced parenting.

One parent on the website [Private School Review](#) who wrote about how being a part of an independent school community was actually an antidote to bubble wrap parenting, said it best by offering the following:

My personal experience both as a parent of two children who attended private schools and as a teacher and administrator in private schools proved

that the small class sizes allow children to learn to express their thoughts and opinions without fear of ridicule or chastisement. Another important factor is the approach most private schools take. You see, they don't teach only the academics. Private schools aim to develop the whole children. Academics, extracurricular activities, and sports provide many opportunities to empower even the least confident child. This happens under the watchful eyes and guidance of both faculty and staff.

Because parents who have chosen to be a part of the Ashbrook community have done so, in part, because they know that their family's values are shared by the teachers and administrators at our school, it is easier for them to "let go" and give their children an opportunity to work with others, experience measured physical and social bumps and scrapes, independently problem solve through these moments, and gain the sense of self agency and personal competence that results. Based on our School's mission, Explorer parents are also aware that incidents of bullying and unkindness are virtually unknown at Ashbrook: the "safety net" is there... but it's invisible, and gets more and more invisible as the years play out, and this makes all the difference.

Ashbrook parents have also chosen our school for the home-school partnership that membership affords, appreciation for the greater sense of "being known" as a family, and feeling of kinship with school staff. Because the children of Ashbrook families engage with their teachers and peers in environments that are small, they report feeling connected to, on the same page with, and closer to the decisions that result in a safe and joyous student experience. In the case of our three children, the fact that Eileen and I felt more connected to their teachers, to their peers and their families, and to school leadership, was a significant step towards helping us justify "letting go."

If Eileen and I experienced an epiphany in any of this, it was when we came to terms with the idea that our children were going to enter into risky environments throughout their entire lives, both intentionally and unintentionally, and *that maybe the best bubble wrap* we could provide them with were lessons that taught them how to assess or calculate risk, take healthy risks, and avoid peer pressure. In these ways, we would help them to evaluate whether or not to engage in risky activities and, if so, to risk in safe ways.

Swimming a greater distance than they thought possible, climbing higher on the play structure than ever before, jumping an obstacle that seemed impossible the day before, riding the subway to school on their own, or "no-braking" a scary downhill on a mountain bike are memories of moments I witnessed in the lives of our children. All were hazardous by their very nature, involved independent and real time risk assessment... AND scared the heck out of Eileen and me when we watched them play out, sometimes not so smoothly. At the same time, even the roughest moments from the list above were growth

experiences, and maybe the roughest among them were the most important and enduring growth experiences (for more on the importance of play, see my 9/23/33 IIMY? article).

I am grateful that I was given an opportunity to check my parenting style, one of the benefits of being entrusted with the awesome responsibility of working with the children of so many other families. I believe this has made me a better parent and better educator. Letting go a bit has helped my children and the children of others know that my high expectations for their success in life include my confidence in their ability to courageously engage in activities that could result in their being hurt in a variety of ways. That said, by falling and getting hurt, or by failing, my own children and the children of others move closer to success at whatever they are attempting, by developing the grit they needed to get up, dust themselves off, and climb back on the horse, an act my family still calls “failing forward.”

In the end, the line between healthy parenting and overparenting is different for every family, and how much parenting is too much parenting is obviously up to each parent to decide for themselves. Assessing risks for our youngest children and playing the role of surrogate prefrontal cortex makes a lot of sense, up to a point, but let go too soon and you could be accused of “underparenting.” The tricky part for Eileen and me was how to wean our children (and ourselves!) from the bubble wrap. Like in all things in life, especially just about every decision involving our children, finding natural inflection points that are comfortable and healthy, can be fraught.

It is my hope that parents reading this edition of IIMY?, as the primary educators of their own children, know that Ashbrook is here for them as they navigate these questions. As members of the extended Explorer family, we stand ready to support our families and partner with them in the healthy raising of their children, in the myriad ways this happens. In this spirit, please consider clicking on any of the below titles, resources I found helpful over the years and in writing this article.

