

Courage: Helping Children to Taking Healthy Risks to Become Their Own Superhero

In a world filled with superheroes such as Spiderman, Superman, Wonder Woman, Batgirl and Batman, children are surrounded by many fictional examples of courage. What messages of courage do our children grow up in from movies and cartoons? Are they accurate and helpful? What messages of courage do we, as parents and educators provide for our children? More importantly, what messages of courage will help our children to grow up to be confident, competent and resilient individuals?

In movies and cartoons, superheroes are often portrayed as having some special strength or super power, which help them to do good and defeat evil. They are usually born with or attain these special strengths or super powers, which give them the ability to be courageous. For most children, they are not born with special strengths or super powers. Even for those that are born with special abilities, such as Michael Jordan, they often need coaching by trusted adults (parents, teachers, coaches) to encourage them to develop their “super powers.” It’s important for children to know they don’t have to “look like” a superhero to be courageous. Jackie Robinson and Rosa Parks were regular people who did courageous things to stand up for what they believe in. And children are surrounded by many real life heroes who show courage, such as their parents and teachers, police officers, firefighters and our military.

The important question becomes, then, what messages of courage will help children to grow up to be confident, competent and resilient individuals (to become their own superheroes)?

Messages that will help children to become their own superheroes are:

- be courageous to take healthy risks and not those that will put them in danger.
- be courageous to get up even when they “fall down” or fail.
- be courageous to stand up for what is right and for what they believe in.

Helping children be courageous to take healthy risks and not those that will put them in danger:

Parents and teachers often think it is their job to keep children safe from anything that may be harmful (physically or emotionally) or risky. While it is important to help our children be safe from certain real dangers, such as a hot stove, crossing the street, or strangers, it is equally important to help our children to be courageous to take healthy risks and not those that will put them in danger. With opportunities to take healthy risks, they develop courage to believe in themselves and the resiliency to believe they can face challenges they will face, even when trusted adults are not around.

In “Building Courage in Kids – How to Teach Kids to Be Brave” Karen Young shared three questions to help children consider to ensure the risk is a healthy one of them:

- Will it break an important rule or is it against the law?
- Will it hurt someone?
- Does it feel right for you?

Discussing the above questions and using real life examples from your own experience will be helpful.

Some safe risks children should be encouraged to do:

- Learn a new skill or get involved in a new activity that stretches their comfort zone
- Try out for a part in a play or a team
- Read a “next level” book or try a challenging math problem
- Let their teacher know that they were not able to complete their homework
- Trying a new food
- Order their own meal at a restaurant
- Ride a bike or climb a tree
- Say they are sorry for a mistake they made
- Using real age appropriate tools (hammer and nails, hand saw, hot glue gun) with appropriate safety precautions

To help your child to have the courage to take healthy risks, knowing your child’s tolerance of risk and helping them to understand their own tolerance is beneficial. Balancing this tolerance with opportunities “right outside” of their comfort zone is key. As parents, you know your children best. Other ways to help your child to take a healthy risk include teaching them self-talk (“I can do this”), to have them take deep breaths, and to reflect on previous occasions when they are courageous and the results.

Helping children be courageous to get up even when they “fall down” or fail:

When children try something new, the results often are not exactly what they hope for. Sometimes, they may even fail. And parents often want to protect their children from this. But it’s important to understand that trying something new, especially when they may fail is courageous. And when doing something for the first time, you may not have the skills, practice or experience to do it well or be successful. But they should not give up. Children should be encouraged to focus on the “journey” and less on the goal. When the goal is the only focus, when what is achieved doesn’t meet the goal exactly, it may seem like a failure. In the end, however, a wonderful lesson or benefit often comes from the courageous journey.

As parents, you can model for children times you are being courageous. This should include the struggles you went through to accomplish your goal and times that you failed to meet your goal and how you coped as a result.

Helping children be courageous to stand up for what is right and for what they believe in:

Courage can also be about doing what is right, to not to bow to peer pressure, or standing up for bullying. As parents, you share with them your family’s values. And as they grow up, children will be confronted with situations that may challenge these values. It could be lying about breaking something to protect themselves or cheating on a test. Or when they get older, it could be sneaking a drink of beer at a friend’s house at a sleepover. Or it could be standing on the side when they see a friend being made fun of.

Often in these situations, parents are not around and we hope that children will be courageous enough to do what is right, to do what is in accordance with your family values. Developing the

idea of being courageous (such as riding a bike without training wheels) is a first step. It gives children the idea that they can do something difficult. Having open discussions about your family's values and situations that may challenge these values is also important. Talk with your child about times when you were torn between two choices, a choice where doing what is right may not have been so "cool" and doing what friends were doing. Model for your child what is right. If they see you park in a handicap stall, even if it's just for a few minutes, so you can buy something in the store, they learn that it is ok to not follow all the rules. When confronted with seeing a friend or classmate being bullied or made fun of, we should encourage children to do something about it and not just be a bystander. Maybe they can get some help from an adult. Discuss the difference between tattling and helping another. Or maybe they can be courageous enough to be an "upstander," someone who stands up for someone being made fun of by saying "Stop!" None of the above is easy, especially when social standing becomes more and more important as children get older.

The Benefits of courage:

Children develop courage and resiliency when they are given real opportunities to be courageous and take healthy risks. It helps them to become stronger, both physically and mentally. Courage builds confidence to overcome one of life's many challenges or accomplish something they may consider difficult. Being courageous to try something that is difficult will result in greater learning and success in school. They will also be more willing to try new things, which leads to accomplishing small and large feats at home as well as participating in activities in an outside of school. They feel a sense of accomplishment and achievement and their confidence grows. They feel empowered to approach tasks or situations that may seem new or risky to them. Also, they are able to better stand up to peer pressure, especially if it is against what they wish to do or what they believe is right.

References:

Play Wales. A Playworker's Guide to Risk. 2008; Available at: <http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEETS/playworkers%20guide%20to%20risk.pdf>, 2017.

Building Courage in Kids – How to Teach Kids to Be Brave Posted by Karen Young; Available at <https://www.heysigmund.com/building-courage-in-kids/>

9 Ways to Cultivate Courage in Kids by Michele Borba; Available at <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2017-05-11/9-ways-to-cultivate-courage-in-kids>

Books about courage:

"Courage" by Bernard Waber

"Brave Irene" by William Steig.

"Wonder" by R. J. Palacio

"Stand Up for Yourself and Your Friends" by Patti Kelley Criswell and Angela Martini.