

Scared of Letting Go?
Balancing Safety and Independence
By Erin Mantz

For many parents, Halloween conjures up fond memories of the ultimate childhood fun – running carefree through the neighborhood, knocking on doors of known neighbors, full of excitement and a familiar sense of adventure. But that was then. Today, as our kids climb into their costumes, letting them step outside the house seems a little bit trickier. Even trick-or-treating on the block makes many moms and dads more anxious, concerned and cautious than ever before. Does this level of protection and caution impact our kids? We talked with experts and parents to gauge their experiences and impressions, and we found some helpful solutions along the way.

Nurturing Independence & Creativity In a Scary but Brave New World

We live in a world where terrorism and kidnapping stories are a frequent part of the nightly news. We lived through the horrible sniper attacks in our area. Some of us don't know our neighbors well – or at all. Given these factors, we *should* be careful when we let our kids outside! Understandably, many parents do limit – or even prohibit – their kids from playing alone outside. But what consequences does this caution have on our children?

As running around outside with the neighborhood kids becomes harder to do, children can be affected. “Playing outside is a big part of imagination and interactivity,” states Heidi S. Emmer, LCSW, who works with children in her Bethesda practice. Emmer has seen how television and video games – often alternative activities to what parents remember as playing outside – can make some kids less sociable, less expressive and less interactive. But even in today's troubled times, Emmer believes parents have the power to do a lot of positive things inside the home. Proposing creative activities, doing art projects, giving kids age-appropriate responsibilities around the house, encouraging them to make choices when possible – all these actions contribute to a child's growing independence and confidence around his decision-making abilities.

McLean native Caroline Hacker, mom of 2- and 4-year-old boys, tries hard to walk that fine line of encouraging their sense of adventure while keeping a watchful eye. She marvels at how she played freely outside as a child, less than a mile away from her current home, and how her sons' experience is already so different. "Even though our area has a very small-town feel – young families even arrange for dinner delivery when someone in the neighborhood has a new baby – I wouldn't dream of letting my oldest son walk next door unsupervised or run through the sprinkler alone for five minutes in the front yard. It's hard. I don't want my sons to know that I feel the world is unsafe, but I've been face-to-face with indications that bad things do happen here." To give her sons the sense of independence they may be missing from unstructured, outdoor neighborhood play, Hacker purposely limits both television and electronic toy time to encourage more creativity and imaginary play. She sees how day care settings and preschool camps can play important roles in making kids more independent and building social skills away from mom and dad.

The Psychological Impact

Can today's kids be impacted for growing up without simply "going out to play"? Absolutely, according to Dr. Jeffrey Schaler, a professor in the Department of Justice, Law and Society at the American University School of Public Affairs. As we keep our kids closer, they may miss out on key benefits of unstructured, outdoor play with neighborhood peers: spontaneous interactions to build social skills and practice decision-making, chances to go exploring, time to create new games. "As they hear the world is a dangerous place and that they have to be careful, some kids can develop catastrophic expectations or come to view the world in black-and-white terms. In addition, kids are naturally egocentric. As they hear about bad things going on, they may feel responsible for them," says Schaler.

Schaler offers many other examples of how kids can be negatively impacted. Some may become more dependent on their parents or experience separation anxiety. Some may become depressed or have problems interacting with the world. Others may

view their parents as somewhat helpless and take on the role of protector. Sensitive children may learn to be paranoid. Overall, it may affect kids' abilities to do what they want to do, because they view the world as more powerful than they are. The good news is, parents can do a lot of positive things to avoid negative outcomes (see "Tips" sidebar). Learn how we can protect our children, teach them to be careful and instill some independence – without portraying the world as an extraordinarily scary place.

Moms Redefine the Boundaries of Freedom on the Block

As moms try to assess how much freedom is enough, different factors figure in. Can living on a cul-de-sac bring parents a little more comfort? Not necessarily, says Dayna Goldsmith, Potomac cul-de-sac resident and mom of three kids under 8. "Most neighborhood kids stay in their yards. It's too bad, because if they were allowed to go out and find their friends, people wouldn't use television and video games as much." Kids lose out on some unstructured social interaction time. As a child growing up just a few minutes away – on another cul-de-sac at that – Goldsmith recalls being in third grade and walking her younger sister to school. Now, she has a third-grade son and wouldn't dream of letting him even walk to the bus stop without an adult.

In some cases, a parent's priorities around fostering independence – or even the kind of street she lives on – impacts how she handles independent outdoor play. Illy Perotti, mom of three kids ages 4, 7 and 9, thinks it's important to give her kids some independent playtime in the backyard of their Great Falls home. She is a strong example of putting experts' advice into action. Perotti talks openly to her kids about stranger danger and teaches them to be aware of their feelings and surroundings. "I always tell them that if a stranger drives up or you feel unsafe, come and get me. They have actually done this before." Living on a private road helps, too. But Perotti has the present and future in mind. "I don't want my kids to grow up and be afraid to leave our house, go on a bike ride or be hindered by a fear of strangers and the world. Giving them some freedom to run around and explore on their own is helping them make choices and build an independence they will need for the rest of their lives."

A Community Balances Freedom, Friends and Fun on Halloween

Sometimes, we don't hear enough about how our communities are getting together and making good things happen for kids. "On Halloween, trick-or-treating is alive and well in the Palisades! We actually encourage it," says Anne Ourand, mom of three and a member of the DC Palisades Citizens Organization. While she is quick to admit that "neighborhoods are not like they used to be," she raves that many families in the Palisades have no qualms about kids going trick-or-treating house to house, where the streets are considered friendly and fun. Still, Ourand does see how some kids today are affected by missed neighborhood opportunities. "From lost creativity to lost independence, it's those long periods of unstructured play where kids *have to* find something to do, like concoct a new game. Kick-the-can is gone."

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SIDEBAR: Positive, Powerful Tips for Parents

What *can* you do to protect your kids, impart a sense of reality and caution – but not overwhelm them with fear? Experts share these tips that parents can put into practice:

- **Keep perspective.** Consider the truthfulness and accuracy of the "watch out, danger lurks everywhere" message we hear all around us.
- **Practice what you preach.** It's not the words you say that influence your children the most – it's the examples you set with your own behaviors.
- **Create a safe environment where kids can take some risks.** But take the extra step of modeling behavior and demonstrating examples of courage.
- **Communicate with your kids and teach common sense.** Go back to the basics of "stranger danger" that you likely learned as a child.

- **Convey consequences that arise from risks and decisions.** For example, if you are watching a television program and see an action resulting in an inaccurate consequence, correct it out loud.
- **Get creative!** Enroll your kids in a drama class or start an art project at home.
- **Maximize their social interaction as early as possible.** Make playtime with their peers a priority. Children learn independence, practice social skills and develop competency and confidence through interaction with others. Schedule play dates for younger kids; encourage older ones to invite friends over.
- **Foster self-esteem.** Understand your children's developmental stages as you teach about risks, consequences and responsibility. Avoid treating them as if they're older – or younger – than they really are.
- **Encourage their imagination.** And teach that they can control it. This will help them control their fears and anxieties about the real world.
- **Find places and times for physical fitness.** Enroll them in a sports league, gymnastics or dance class. Limit time sitting in front of TV and video games.
- **Build a sense of adventure and exploration.** Encourage creative and pretend play, visit a museum or go on a nature walk.