

## ALLOWING CHILDREN THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES – PART I

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Over the Holiday Break, I was skiing with my two oldest children, Nicholas, age 5, and Quinn,, age 10. We were skiing with some close friends and spending some time with them before they moved out of state. It was a bitter sweet couple of days. It was wonderful spending time with my boys where there are few daily distractions, but it was sad because we realized that this was going to be one of the last times we got to spend a weekend skiing with our friends. During a breakfast conversation with my friend, Brian, we were discussing how we interacted with our children as they learned to ski, especially when they were struggling or fell. Brian mentioned that he felt that he jumped in too quickly to help his kids when they had fallen, and how hard it was to watch his children struggle. I couldn't help but agree. It was a serendipitous conversation, as the monthly MYT for Kids article was due momentarily.

I learned a great deal about my son Nicholas and his ability to overcome adversity in helping him to learn how to ski. As you may know, when you learn to ski, you fall *a lot*. This is Nicholas's second year skiing, and he is still learning how to navigate the trail and to stay in control of his skis (and his speed). The first few runs of the weekend, Nicholas spent quite a bit of time on bottom. As he began to fall on those first few runs I remembered watching his ski instructor last year spend quite a bit of time teaching him and other children how to get up when they fell. Here are some of the things I observed as I watched her teach the children:

- She didn't wait until the children fell to teach them how to get up.
- She started off by letting them know that they were going to fall as they learned, and that getting up was the most important thing they could learn!
- She also showed them how to put on their skis by themselves on the side of a mountain after they fell.
- Once she showed them, she helped them for the first couple of falls, and gave them encouragement.
- After the first few times they were on their own to get back up, even in some challenging circumstances.
- She displayed a lot of confidence in their ability to take care of themselves, and was always kind.
- She never did for the children what she knew they could do for themselves.

I watched the ski instructor work with my son over the week of lessons and was incredibly gratified to watch his confidence in himself grow, not only on skis, but in his deportment as he found new strength within himself. It was a great reminder for me of how important it is for children to experience their own trials and difficulties, and with support, overcome those difficulties themselves, and to discover their own capabilities.

As a parent, it was also a good time to reflect on how easy it is to both over-help and under-help children, both of which can invite dependency, low self-esteem, and lack of resilience. By not allowing children to have their own experiences through rescuing or under-helping we rob them of the opportunity to strengthen their disappointment and discomfort muscles, and to discover how capable they can be.

At a time when every advertisement that we see or hear promises the end to any discomfort or inconvenience, it is difficult to remember that growing pains are an essential part of growing. However, it is the discomfort and disappointment that we experience that often helps us learn to make healthy decisions for ourselves, and to discover our own ability to overcome adversity.

It was difficult to follow the example of the ski instructor as I skied with Nicholas this weekend. I had to be very intentional in allowing him to get up himself, and encourage him (and not. rescue him) when he was struggling. I also had to make sure that I gave him help and encouragement when he really needed it so he wouldn't

become discouraged. However, as the weekend went on, I once again observed his confidence grow, and his emotional resilience increase as I demonstrated confidence in his abilities to get up and deal with discomfort. I also watched how his successes really became his own.

By the end of the weekend Nicholas was actually demanding that I not help him egress from the chair lift. If you've ever learned to ski, you know that getting off the chairlift can be one of the more intimidating and challenging parts of learning how to ski, and one of the scariest times to "let go" as a parent. As we ascended to the top of the ski run, Nicholas exclaimed, "Dad, I can do it by myself!" Unfortunately, those were not the words I was hoping to hear, but I did manage to let go and allow him to do it himself. Sure enough, he knew his capabilities and disembarked successfully *by himself*. His comment immediately afterward was, "I told you I could do it by myself!" Yes you did, Nicholas, yes you did.

Next month we'll discuss some specific strategies on how to allow children to experience appropriate challenges and the according successes and discouragements in a way that teaches children to become confident, capable and resilient.