

HELPING OR RESCUING , YOU BE THE JUDGE

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This morning I was speaking to my wife on the phone about our plans for the evening. It is a Friday, and every Friday the kids and I go skiing with the school ski club at a nearby mountain. It has been very cold in Maine this week, and during my conversation with Sondra I mentioned that my son did not have long johns for skiing. Here is a rough estimate of our conversation:

Sondra: "I'll bring his long johns in this morning."

Chip: "I don't think that's a good idea. It is not bad for him to experience the cold, and learn that he needs to prepare. He'll never learn if we keep rescuing him."

Sondra: "We help each other."

Chip: "When is he going to learn for himself?"

Sondra: "You left your briefcase here, too."

Chip: "That's different, would you mind bringing that in for me?"

Does this conversations sound familiar? Who is correct? Well, since I'm writing this article, let's assume that it's me 😊 Honestly, I believe that there is truth in both sides of this discussion. The question really is, where and when do we help? Where does helping become enabling and interfere with a child's growth and development? Where does not helping become irresponsible or neglectful? So, let's peel the onion back a little and take a look at this scenario.

Natural Consequences

To begin let's take a look at natural consequences. What are they? A natural consequence is a natural outcome of an action taken by the child, and is allowed to happen because the adult does not interfere. So, if a child leaves his coat inside when he goes out on a cold day, if the adult does not interfere the child will get cold. The idea here is that allowing a natural consequence gives the child the opportunity to make the connection for himself by learning through his own experience. If the adult interferes there is a lost opportunity for the child to draw their own conclusion and become self-sufficient. The adult who never allows their child to experience the consequences of their decisions might very well find themselves still nagging the child to put on their coat years later!

On the other hand, there is a line that needs to be drawn here, between allowing a child to experience a natural consequence and being neglectful. We can test this idea by taking it to an extreme. It would obviously be a situation of serious neglect if an adult let a young child play in the street and allowed the child to experience the natural consequences of that decision. The consequences are far beyond the child's ability to experience safely and learn from. This is neglect.

What is Enabling

Enabling behavior is that which shields a child from the outcomes or consequences of their own actions in an effort to reduce the negative experiences for the child. This behavior by the adult is almost always rooted in love and concern. No one wants to see their child experience pain, miss opportunities, or encounter disappointment.

Despite the love and concern by the parent, however, the result of enabling is most often dependence or rebellion by the child. Let's use the example of the young child who wants to go outside without his coat. What might it look like if the parent stepped in every time the child wanted to go outside in cold weather and made sure that the child had his coat on? At first, when the child is younger (age 3-4), it might certainly look like a caring parent, right? However, let's fast forward this situation a few years, and now assume that the child is 8 or 9 years old. Can you see that child running outside without his coat when his parent isn't looking and choosing to be cold *at* his parent? Conversely, if the enabling behavior by the parent had manifested in dependence by the child, might that child choose to stay inside rather than risk experiencing getting cold, or need to check with an adult before he made a decision to go out?

I believe that it is also helpful to point out here that occasionally helping a child do something that they can do for themselves does not mean that we are harming our children. Helping a child in this way, from time to time, is like eating candy. A nice piece of candy once in a while is a treat! However, if we try to live on candy we'll get sick.

Where to Help

The question that we're really trying to answer here is: where do I help? Here are some simple questions to consider when deciding whether to help for your child or to allow your child to experience natural consequences:

Does my child have the ability to absorb the consequences of this natural consequence safely?

Does my child have the information that they need to make this decision? Have I taken time to teach or train them?

What is my child learning, long-term, from this natural consequence?

What does the big picture look like? Do I tend to over help, or do I tend to under help?

Who was Right?

In my conversation with my wife, I believe that we both had a good point. Let's test this situation with the questions above:

Does my son have the ability to absorb the consequences of this natural consequence safely? *Yes, he is 12, and knows to come inside when he is cold. He also has greater resilience at 12 than I do at 47!*

Did my son have the information that he needed to make this decision? *Yes, he did. He has been skiing since he was 5, and knows about cold weather protection. Have I taken the time to train him? Yes, since he started skiing he has had his own backpack with all his gear, and he has learned how to inventory his gear.*

What is my child learning, long term, from this natural consequence? *I believe that if he got cold he'd come in frequently, and might miss some skiing. I would hope that he would learn from his decision.*

What does the big picture look like? Do we over help or under help? *This is where the conversation might sound familiar. My weakness is to under help, and my wife's is to over help. In general, our children are given the opportunity to experience There is an overall sense of consistency and clear expectations.*

So, how did this story end? My wife dropped off the long johns and my briefcase. Did we make the right decision? You be the judge!