danger, danger everywhere! helping children feel safe in a culture of fear

by Diane E. Levin

Not long ago my husband Gary was standing outside the restrooms at a mall. A lone, crying little boy of about three appeared in the hallway. Gary bent down to ask him if he needed help. The boy started wailing, “I want my Mommy, my Mommy!” Just as Gary began reassuring the boy that they would find his mommy, the boy’s mother came running down the hall. She grabbed her son’s hand, yelling that she was getting the police. Before Gary could explain, the woman stomped off with her now-whimpering child. He felt thrown off balance and sad. Had the world become such a dangerous place that a man helping a frightened child find his mother was a thing of the past?

A few months later, I attended an event at a ‘Travelers’ (often referred to as Gypsies) caravan community in Northern Ireland. A child about the same age as the child above was walking around anxiously calling, “Mommy, Mommy.” I bent down and offered to help him find his mommy. He tightly gripped one of my fingers as we went to a nearby community member to ask if she knew the boy’s mother. She said, “Yes, thanks. I’ll take him to her.” The boy wouldn’t let go of my finger, so the three of us went to the other side of the yard where his parents were found and they had a tearful, happy reunion.

The danger of strangers. What different lessons the two boys, both worried about finding their mothers, are learning! One is learning that the world is scary and that you can’t trust grown-ups (or at least men) to help you when you’re in need; the other, that you can rely on grown-ups to help keep you safe and meet your needs.

Will the first mother feel reassured when her son, at age 4 or 5 is taught a ‘Stranger Danger’ curriculum at child care like so many children in early childhood programs and elementary schools are taught today? What will the Stranger Danger program mean to the children who are taught it? Consider this: A few days after it was taught in one child care program, the children were walking to a neighborhood park with their teachers. A man walked up to a teacher asking for directions. One child burst into tears because the teacher was talking to a stranger! The Center for Missing and Exploited Children does not support the teaching of Stranger Danger programs to young children because “they are not effective at keeping children safer” (McBride, 2009).

Dangers beyond strangers. But fear of strangers is not the only danger young children encounter these days. Soon after the United States went to war in Afghanistan, five-year-old Harriet was in her family’s car near an airport. Just as a plane was flying loudly overhead, the car was in a minor accident with another car. Harriet burst into tears, gasping, “That plane dropped a bomb on us!” Because she had heard about the war and the bombs, she had figured out that all planes must now carry bombs. And what about the six-year-old boy who violated his Delaware school’s Zero Tolerance Policy. He was so excited about joining the Cub Scouts that he brought to school his Cub Scout camping utensil that had a spoon and a knife. He was suspended and faced 45 days in the Delaware districts’ reform school (Urbina, 2009) for bringing a weapon to school. His moment of happiness turned into a nightmare of punishment and fear. (After much media coverage and public outrage, the conviction and punishment were ultimately lifted.)

I visited a kindergarten classroom near Boston recently. The school system had a new regulation: No food products could be brought into any classroom to share with others. To celebrate one child’s birthday without the usual food treat, the class decided to make a play-dough birthday cake for the birthday child and sing “Happy Birthday” to her at a class meeting. But then play-dough became off limits, too. This teacher
also reported that in addition to the food ban, this was the first year in her 20 years of teaching kindergarten that she couldn’t have a pet because of fears about children’s possible allergies.

Finally, after all the recent discussion about the arrival of swine flu, I was at a shopping mall. A young child touched a vending machine asking her father to buy a treat. The father grabbed the child’s hand and said, “Don’t touch that. There are germs!”

Pretend or real?

Each time I see or hear about one of these dangers in children’s lives — whether they are legitimate or not — I ask myself, “Has there always been this level of fear? Naturally, adults want to keep children safe, but have children always been exposed to a world so full of danger and have adults always reacted with the levels of anxiety and fear [that] we see above?” I do not think so.

This conclusion was supported when I recently assigned the students in my course on children’s play at Wheelock College the task of interviewing a person over 50 years old about the play they engaged in when they were young. The last question was, “Do you see any changes between your play and the play of children today? Almost every respondent commented on the issue of safety being hugely different today. One grandfather said,

“The day seems that people are more fearful of their children encountering evil. Everything has to be planned and supervised for them. When I was young, I was on my own to figure out what to do with my friends both inside and out.”

And a mother said,

“In today’s society adult supervision is paramount. The world is viewed as an evil and dangerous place where children can be abducted, hurt, or God forbid, make a bad decision. This prevents them from engaging in free, unstructured, creative play where they make the rules and use their imaginations.”

The hazards of growing up in a ‘dangerous’ world

The four most important questions we must ask ourselves as we see the dangers that are piling up in children’s everyday lives and adults’ reactions to them are:

- What does it mean for young children to constantly see and hear that dangers are everywhere and to see the adults being fearful too?
- How do the dangers affect children’s ideas about the world and how it works, how they relate to other people and their ability to go out into the world as independent and capable individuals?
- How is parenting (and teaching) affected by ‘dangers everywhere’?
- What can we do to promote children’s optimal development and learning in today’s culture of fear?

Danger through a child’s eyes. Children use their experience to build an understanding of the world. But they do not just passively absorb information or ideas.
As we see in the example above of the girl who thinks all planes carry bombs because of what she has heard about the war, what children figure out can make the world seem like a dangerous place to them — a place where the adults in their lives are unable to protect them and where weapons and fighting are a regular part of keeping people safe. When children see adults reacting with fear, it further fuels their tendency to interpret the world as dangerous.

“Please Help Me, I’m Scared!” One of the most basic human needs in early childhood is to develop a sense of trust and safety in the world around them (Erikson, 1963). It is a necessary precondition for optimal social, emotional, and intellectual development and learning to occur. Feeling safe allows children to put their energy into positive growth — into becoming autonomous, competent, and caring people — who learn how to have a positive influence on their world rather than into trying to protect themselves from danger.

When children live in fear, this sense of safety and trust can be seriously undermined (Erikson, 1950). Such children often:

■ Put their energy into trying to keep themselves safe instead of into learning about and mastering their world.
■ Lash out and use violence against others in order to try to protect themselves.
■ Develop a lens for interpreting experiences from the point of view of expecting danger.

Of course, all children are and always have been in environments where there are some risks — and for some children there are more risks than others. But one of the highest priorities for adults who care for children must be to help children feel safe, even when there is danger (Levin, 2003). Research shows that the children who fare best when they are living in communities with serious danger are those who have adults to help them feel safe (for instance, see Garbarino et al., 1999). The stories above all illustrate how children are in situations that promote fear, not safety. And, many children are more likely to use violence and aggression themselves to keep themselves safe when they feel endangered and don’t think adults can do the job.

Through parents’ and providers’ eyes. Whether the dangers are real or not, it is the job of the adults who care for children to keep them safe. What does it do to adults’ ability to do their job well when they are told over and over about more and more dangers that their children face? It can:

■ Weaken their attachment relationships with children as they focus their energy on identifying and preventing dangers;
■ Channel adults’ energy into protecting children from danger instead of optimizing their development and learning;
■ Undermine adults’ vital role in helping children gradually become autonomous and competent individuals; and,
■ Make the jobs of caring adults more stressful and complex.

What can we do? Safety, safety everywhere!

At the heart of efforts to meet children’s needs in the current fearful environment — no matter what
the nature of the dangers that surround them might be — is helping them deeply experience through their daily routines what it means to feel safe. Since young children learn best from direct experience, we can do this in age-appropriate and meaningful ways by having children actually live by the “Safety Rule” (Levin, 2003). The “Safety Rule” provides a very powerful vehicle for counteracting much of the harm caused by a culture of fear.

The Safety Rule: “I Am Safe Here.”

- My body is safe: “No one will hit, kick, push, or hurt me.”
- My feelings are safe: “No one will laugh at me or make me feel like a failure.”
- My thoughts are safe: “I can express my feelings and opinions without being interrupted, ridiculed, or punished.”
- My work is safe: “No one will disrupt or damage the activities I work on.”

Implementing the Safety Rule can deeply affect how we work with children. For instance, when they have a disagreement and one child hits another or makes a mean and hurtful comment, the Safety Rule has us helping children discuss the conflict in terms of how what happened is not safe and then come up with ideas about what they can do to deal with the problem in ways that keep both children safe. The one rule to use when dealing with conflicts and discipline becomes, “We need to find a way to solve our problems that keeps everybody safe.” This means that common approaches for dealing with children’s aggressive behavior, such as time-out, need to be rethought in light of the Safety Rule.

When children have experiences in or out of their group setting that produce fear and stress, the Safety Rule says adults will help the children find ways to work through the danger until their sense of safety and security return. This means we need to give children time and opportunities to restore a sense of safety. We can do this by providing opportunities for them to safely talk about and to use play and make pictures to work through the fear.

Finally, at the heart of implementing the Safety Rule is the trusting relationship that children develop with the adults who care for them. Children need to know that adults are there to keep them safe, so they can put their energy into learning about and mastering their world.

From danger, danger everywhere to feeling safe

There are many benefits as children actually learn how to put the Safety Rule into action:

- They come to trust that it is the job of caring adults to keep them safe.
- They develop a whole set of skills for having a positive effect on others and their environment, thereby reducing their need for fear and aggression.
- They learn that the Safety Rule can actually help them find peaceful ways to solve their problems so the world begins to feel like a less dangerous place.
- Their energy is freed up to focus on learning and mastery instead of safety.

References


