

Foster positive self-esteem with illusions of security

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When my daughter was five I sent her, by herself, to the grocery store two blocks away to buy a loaf of bread. Folks knew who she was in this small college town where I taught psychology. Safe? Perhaps not, but I believed so. How proud she was to have expanded her world, be trusted with money and help her Mom! She smiled and smiled as I waited by the door.

Her self-esteem, sense of mastery, her “I can do” attitude, was enhanced.

Conversely, when she was in fifth grade her class was shown pictures of the destructive forces of fire, followed by a fire chief’s presentation on “Safety” or what a child should do in all kinds of unsafe situations. My daughter came home crying and crying.

Her self-esteem was damaged. She felt, “The world is an unsafe place and I am powerless over it.”

Today, marketing that preys on our fears is big business. Feel free to add your own to my list.

Paper shredders - your identity might be stolen
Housing alarm systems – you could be robbed or killed in your sleep
Helmets for bike riding – you might fall, damage your brain and die
Car seats for infants – your child could be killed in a car accident
Cell phones – don’t trust strangers to help you if you have car trouble
Airport security – I won’t even go there
Vitamins – I might die if I don’t swallow ten a day

What’s worse, our behaviors with our children teach them fear. We walk or drive our kids to school in order to prevent bullying or kidnapping. We don’t allow them to play outside unattended, and heaven forbid they should go trick-or-treating by themselves.

Fear activates our stress “fight or flight” response, which is appropriate if sharks attack us. But the more we focus on fears, the more rigid, tense, irritable, uncreative and maladaptive we become.

You might be feeling, “But that’s the reality of today’s world. We must protect ourselves and make our children safe.”

I say we all need to believe in illusions of safety. Look at the list above and assess the probability of those things actually happening to us. It is more probable that we will be safe, yet we irrationally focus on the opposite. And in some uncanny way, what we think

about, focus on, we help create. We need to trust in a secure and safe world, even if it is not 100 % true, which is why I call them illusions of safety.

I laughed when I heard the following necessary illusions at a Chopra Center conference. Our world is round, but every time we take a step, we act as though it's flat. It is much more healthy to believe in flatness. What if we said, "Oh no, the world is really round and I might fall!" In the same vein, our planet is whirling though the solar system, our world is turning on its axis, but we operate under the illusion of stillness.

Our illusions of world flatness, stillness, good health, no cracks in the sidewalk of life, allow us to venture forth, develop our talents, test our mettle and develop "I can do" attitudes. If we want courageous children, we need to model and teach courage. We become what our focus is.

Now make a note of at least one fear that's behind some "security and safety" habit. How can you challenge or diminish its significance? Laughter helps. And not acting on those irrational fears actually builds courage.

Decide where you want to put your life focus, what fears you want to act on or ignore. Me, I know there are sharks in the sea, but I enjoy my daily swim by focusing on the illusion of safety. You may look at the same probabilities and choose not to swim. The real challenge for me is can I get rid of some of those vitamins and still feel healthy?