

HEALTH AND SAFETY

It has always amazed me how vastly different everyone's ideas about health and safety are, especially when it comes to deciding what is healthy and safe for their children. For instance, I know a lot of people who insist on buying organic milk for their kids but think nothing of driving and talking on the cell phone while their kids are in the car. Some of my best friends recently threw out all of their non-stick frying pans because of the risk of toxins winding up in their food, yet they have a trampoline in the back yard for their kids.

Things that seem so worrisome for some parents may seem trivial to others, while the next family may focus on more safety-related concerns that others may not think twice about. How do we decide what is important when it comes to our children's health and safety?

As a child of the 1960's and 1970's, it is a wonder that I survived at all. There were no seatbelts in the back seat of our station wagon – or maybe they were there, but somehow they got pushed down behind the seat (it didn't matter because we hopped into the back end of the station wagon to stretch out anyway). There was cigarette smoke in the family room, I am sure that there was a fair amount of lead paint all around, the local playground did not have mulch or rubber chips to soften the falls, and there certainly was not a bike helmet in the garage.

A lot has changed since then. In short, we have gotten smarter about injury and disease prevention. The government has also taken a more active role in this regard; seat belt, car seat, bike helmet and smoking laws are relatively new, and my local childhood playground would have been shut down in a heartbeat if a 21st Century inspector had seen it. Cynics might say that the driving force behind all of these changes has been the fear of litigation, but I think that the real champions of the cause have been the parents. The topic of childhood safety has really been promoted by a grass-roots parental effort.

I started medical school in 1989, back before everyone had access to so much medical information. The doctor told the patient what to do, and that was that. Since then, the internet has exploded, and medical information is now just a click away. I have watched patients (or in my case, parents) become much more medically savvy. Health and safety topics go from the internet to radio programs, and then they became the topic of parental conversation in the playgroups and on the preschool playgrounds. It is amazing what I have learned from parents – some things are absolutely true and some things are rumors, but if it is the talk of the preschool playground you bet I want to know what people are saying, and you bet I am going to check it out. I heard about BPA in plastic baby bottles from a parent, before the topic had even made the news!

So how much do we really need to worry about, when people are living longer now than ever before? I'll be honest: I worry about a lot! We all have different points of view,

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based on our backgrounds and on our personal experiences, which is why we all tend to worry about different things. For example, I worry about swimming pools because the two kids who lived across the street from me when I was growing up drowned in their family pool in the middle of the night. My undergraduate degree was in ecology and I used to be a pediatric oncologist, so I also worry about chemicals and toxins in the environment and whether or not they might be contributing to childhood cancers. Life expectancy may be at an all time high, but some children are still not living as long as they might.

However, you will have to make your own decisions about what to buy and which activities to allow your children to take part in. The key is to be informed, and there is a lot of information at your fingertips, in the newspapers, and on the radio. There is also no shortage of health and safety issues to worry about – it seems as if a new “hot topic” pops up every month or so.

Unfortunately, information is moving so quickly these days that alarms are sometimes being set off on a widespread level before there is any actual data to back up the claim. Some hypotheses will turn out to be true, and some may not. Last week, I heard a show on the radio about genetically modified salmon, and one of the concerns was that allergic reactions might become more common. Maybe. Maybe not. Actual research takes years to complete. Take immunizations, for instance. When concerns about the link between vaccines and autism arose several years back, there was very little data on the subject. When the research finally caught up, it turned out that the likelihood of having autism was exactly the same for children who had gotten all of their immunizations and children who had not gotten any at all.

There is plenty of information, as well as incomplete information and misinformation floating around out there. It is easy to become afraid of just about anything. The topics can be overwhelming, but for some of these we do not have enough data to reach firm conclusions. Feel free to ask your child’s pediatrician if you need help sorting it all out. You really are your own child’s best advocate, but first you have to be informed.