



LIFE & STYLE

Stop wrapping kids in cotton wool - expert

Last updated 12:58 10/11/2008

Parents are bubble wrapping their kids in today's society, says author Michael Ungar, and impairing their development in the process.

Why do some well-brought-up children go off the deep end when they hit young adulthood? Because they haven't been exposed to risk and responsibility when they were young, says adolescent psychologist Michael Ungar.

The author of *Too Safe For Their Own Good* will be speaking at Poppies Bookshop in Feilding next Tuesday.

The Canadian researcher and family therapist is in Manawatu collaborating with Massey University researchers on an at-risk-youth project.

He says some parents are so worried for the safety of their children that they don't let them take responsibility for anything. They can't ride their bikes to school, climb trees, turn on the stove, have a pocket knife or use power tools, for instance.

And when they hit young adulthood, they can be so hungry for adventure, they take dangerous risks - like getting into drugs, binge drinking and unprotected sex.

Ironically, he says, children are physically safer at this time in history than ever before.

Dr Ungar says today's children are treated differently to their parent's generation. Their parents were often from large families left to themselves a bit more and given the responsibility for getting themselves to school or sports practice.

They were allowed some age-appropriate challenges and responsibilities.

Now children are driven everywhere and often have everything done for them. They are protected from failure and disappointment, but miss out on the benefits that come with manageable amounts of risk.

Dr Ungar says giving an eight-year-old the responsibility for getting their own sports gear ready is a smart thing to do. If the muck up and show up at soccer practice without the right gear, it will have less serious consequences when they are eight than when they are 16 - and heading into a rep game.

He hesitates to give specific levels of responsibility for each age group, because each child and their social world is different.

"It's a bit of a circular argument, but it's about what kids really need to grow up well; what's the right amount of risk and responsibility for them."

Parents should let their children do things that help them jump the maturity gap. It should be manageable but test them slightly a bit more than they can handle, but not so much that they get overwhelmed.

"You have to think about what kind of kid you want your child to be as an adult. What do you want them to know - do you want them to drive safely and be responsible for others? Do you want them to have problem-solving skills?"

For some families, they might not want their eight-year-old walking to school by themselves, but they might be happy with the to walk there with a friend, with a cellphone.

"Another family might say they're not okay with that, but they will let them mow the lawn by themselves when they are 10."

He watched his own children, aged 10 and 12, go out on a small sail boat by themselves recently in a sheltered bay close to home. Adults were watching from the shore, with a motor boat on hand. He says it was right for his family, because his children had grown up learning boat safety, sailing with grandparents and lived by the sea.

"All the safety requirements were there."

Dr Ungar says he often asks parents what they were allowed to do when they were growing up, because that is often the clue for what is right for their own offspring.

"It's not that I want kids to get hurt, but many parents are simply saying to their kids 'You can't do anything'.

"They're not letting them walk to school and preventing them from having the normal developmental challenges.

"Then at 16, there are no more teachers and monitors telling them what they can't do. How do they learn how to navigate the communities to keep themselves safe?"

Dr Ungar uses the Canadian- flavoured example of throwing snowballs. If children are allowed to do this to each other when they are five, six or seven, they can't really hurt each other. And they will learn that hard ice balls aren't so fun, but soft snow ones are.

He says modern parents have a lot of commonsense, but have become quite afraid. That fear can be causing more damage than they realise.

- Manawatu Standard