



Huzzah for the Sophies!

*A Green Hearts essay by Ken Finch
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First, foremost, and always, we must protect our children. This is cultural bedrock in America. And who could argue? Of course we protect our children. In fact, if faced with the terrible choice, most of us would lay down our lives for our sons and daughters. Yet many of us have struggled with a basic question: *What should we protect them from?* And with its more quarrelsome counterpart, *What shouldn't we protect them from?*

Sometimes parents are so quick "to the rescue" that they inadvertently limit their child's longer-term growth. For example, do we protect kids from the near-term misery of eating their broccoli? Or from growing up with poor eating habits? Protect them from bumps, bruises, and broken bones — or from potential obesity and a lack of self-confidence?

Recently, a trip southward led me to a pleasant introduction with a charming, well-mannered young lady named Sophie: *tree climber extraordinaire*. At the ripe old age of eight, her ascension talents have barely been scratched — but nevertheless Sophie climbs trees throughout her well-established neighborhood. In fact, she's on a personal basis with many of them, and she casually pointed out her favorite climbing tree to me.

Now just ponder that statement for a moment....

Sophie has a favorite climbing tree! How many American eight year-olds would I have to ask before I found another with a favorite climbing tree? I might need throat lozenges just to keep up the questioning! And in an ironic twist for those of us who grew up in an age when tree climbing was mostly a boys' domain, Sophie's mom tells a good story. It seems that Sophie invited a boy playmate to join her in trunk traveling. He tried, but soon found that he did not have enough arm strength to do it — whereupon he announced that he didn't really want to climb trees, anyway!

Speaking of Sophie's mom, she's not the least bit worried about her daughter's tree climbing. In fact, she's all in favor of it — along with walking to school, growing a garden, creating a backyard vine teepee, and generally fostering the kind of childhood that so many of us remember fondly, but which is now too rare.

Is Sophie endangered by *under*-protective parents? I don't think so. There is risk in all aspects of life, yet we tend to focus only on the "new" or sensational ones, not the routine ones — even when they're worse! Does any parent forbid their child to ride in a car because auto accidents are the biggest cause of accidental children's death? Do parents boycott youth sports leagues because they are the top cause of emergency room visits by children? No to both, of course — yet we agonize over relatively miniscule risks to our kids like falling from a tree trunk or even just getting dirty!

Truth is, you may be hit and killed by a meteorite the next time you walk out the door. Do you worry about it and stay inside, or go on living your life despite the risk? If we protect our kids *too* much, they become vulnerable to different dangers — ones of omission, that can limit their experience of full and rewarding lives. Children *need* risk. It is an essential part of the growth process: learning to assess dangers, testing one's own abilities, developing good judgment. What happens if they don't practice those skills while they're young? Will they still be trying to learn good judgment when they're 16 and behind the wheel of a car?

And what does life inside a fear-driven protective bubble do to a child's soul? An early British proponent of playgrounds, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, put it perfectly: "Better a broken bone than a broken spirit."

No one should argue for intentionally putting kids in real, grave danger. That's nuts. But it is important to discriminate between risks — i.e., challenges that children can see, assess, and decide whether or not to attempt — and hazards — i.e., unseen dangers that will only cause harm, not growth. Too often we lump the two together and thereby risk retarding the growth and future success of those who we love the very most.

So instead of spending hours of screen-zombie time assessing Mario's risks in jumping from platform to platform, maybe — *just maybe* — our kids should be outside tackling real-world risks, and developing the same fortitude, confidence, and judgment as Sophie!