

Chapter 30 – Born to Explore

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“The first and simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind is curiosity.” – Edmund Burke

Children are curious creatures. Think about a baby, in your arms, unable to crawl. He reaches for dangling or sparkling earrings, for your glasses, trying to pull them off your face, he tugs on your nose or pokes your eyes or sticks his fingers into your mouth. He leans and reaches and grabs at your food. His eyes follow the movement of people or pets or objects.

Think about crawling babies. They can find the tiniest speck of dirt in your newly vacuumed carpet. They find dead bugs on the floor that you swear were never there. They chew on shoes, toys, and yes, even electrical cords. They spin the toilet paper off the roll, splash in the toilet water and pull books off shelves and containers out of cabinets. They have no concept of mine or yours. Everything that is within their reach is theirs to explore; the visitor’s purse, your guest’s meal, a grocery bag.

Think about young children. They touch everything. They want to pick up stuff off the shelves at the grocery store. They want to touch the pretty glass decorations at your neighbor’s house. They ask questions: What is that? Who is that? What is that sound? What is that smell? How long until we get there? They “get into” stuff and can, if misunderstood, annoy their caregivers to no end. Young children, like babies and toddlers, are naturally interested in their surroundings. Without this driving curiosity, without this innate need to explore and understand what the environment provides, children would fail to thrive and to learn. Their ability to make connections and sense of their world would be jeopardized and it is plausible to say that their development would be compromised.

As parents, it is critical that we recognize the role of curiosity in shaping our children’s lives. We must respect this innate characteristic by responding to our children positively when they seek to learn. They should not be punished for touching things in their own home or even a home they are visiting. They should not be scolded for being creative with the things they find, like taking all the Kleenexes out of the box and tossing them into the air, watching them fall like little parachutes. They should not be reprimanded for doing

what they were created to do, which is to explore their surroundings. Constant parental utterings of “No, no, no.” can be confusing to a child. When they gravitate to something of interest, it is far better for parents to follow their child and work with them to explore the newfound interest. Whether it is a plant, a plastic bowl, the remote control, or a silky scarf, talk to your child about what she is seeing and what she is feeling. Describe it to her using rich and vibrant language. Touch it with her. Make relevant associations and pave the way for her to make connections between what she found and the larger world. Validate her interest and in doing so you are teaching your child about the immediate world in which she lives and inevitably building upon her developing language skills. Now, honestly, isn’t that more fun than resorting to “No, no. Don’t touch.”?

If there are specific things that you value in your home and would rather your young child not handle, then put them away for the time being or in a place that is out of your child’s reach. Don’t allow things in your home to hold more value than your own child’s growth and development. There will come a time when your children are able to understand that something is valuable to you or your family and you would appreciate it being respected as such, but expecting this from a toddler, a preschooler, or even a young child is unfair, and to keep it within reach is just setting them up for failure. Remember that children are mono-focused beings with an amazing ability to zero in on one thing that intrigues them in some way. Take advantage of the opportunity to teach, to lead, to enhance their understanding. When our children are young, we have so many opportunities to explore alongside them, to inspire, to excite, and to enrich. If your child is constantly moving in the direction of something he has been told to stay away from, then his curiosity has not been fulfilled. It’s that simple. He’s not being defiant, like I’ve heard so many people claim. A child’s interest in his environment is limitless and natural.

Still not sure what to do when little Sally heads towards the bookshelf again? Seize the moment. Communicate. Tell her what she is seeing. Play with it, tap it, and touch it with her. Does the object make a strange sound if you tap on it? Does it feel hot or cold, soft or hard, squishy or bumpy? Can you find another use for it? Would it be safe to pull it off the shelf and allow her to play with it on the floor? The more children are allowed to “play” with the things in their immediate environment to satisfy their curiosities, the less likely they are to randomly grab and pull things in new environments. However, if children are scolded or struck for touching something in their own home and no longer gravitate towards the object, it does not mean that they really understand why they shouldn’t touch it. Instead, they just associate the object with pain or discomfort and are deprived of a chance to learn and expand their knowledge.

Children beckon us to teach them about what they see, what they hear and what they feel. A child’s interest in his environment is limitless and most importantly, natural. To continually ask a child not to touch things in his world is like telling a starving man not to

feast on the food laid before him. It would behoove us, as parents, to become more accepting of our child's need to learn through exploration. If we work to stay involved with our kids instead of working to deter their curiosity it may help us to become a bit more curious too.

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