

The dignity of risk

Story by Sarah Fiddaman

Risk always seems bigger when the person in question is so small. As a new parent I was pretty anxious, and although I might have been that way with any baby there was definitely an added element having a baby with Down syndrome.

The fiercely overprotective desire to bubble wrap baby Charlie mostly came from fear. And some of that fear was probably warranted – with a heart condition, a challenging feeding journey, and hypotonia. Of course I wasn't going to play rough and tumble with my baby! Of course I was going to freak out about every infection!

Now that Charlie is a big (not so big) four year old I still feel my knuckles whiten as she attempts to descend a flight of stairs. But I breathe deeply, trust that she's got this, and know that if she doesn't she'll still be ok. Piece by piece the tightly wound bubble wrap has started to deflate. Our daughter is strong and capable and now I find myself having to encourage others (and myself) to let go a little. To provide opportunities for her to try and fail. To give her a chance to speak, to listen carefully when she does, and to trust her to make decisions in her own time. As I begin to trust my own parenting a bit more, I can hand over some of that trust to Charlie.

Take scissors. For whatever reason I decided to use a pretty minimal amount of intervention when learning to use scissors. She did cut herself (and was an accomplice in cutting a treasured book) – but she didn't cut her finger off, she didn't poke her sister's eye out and she didn't require a trip to emergency. Trusting her gave her confidence and expedited the learning process. As usual, Charlie has proven to be our greatest teacher.



Sometimes I think I push too hard for Charlie to learn skills that will help her grow into an independent young woman. Things take longer and sometimes I'm impatient. I have to remind myself that total independence is not the goal. I want my daughter to be able to do things for herself as she grows, if it's available to her, but I also don't want to undermine the value of dependence and interconnectedness. Dependence on others for comfort, support, friendship, guidance. In cultivating independence, I want to make sure what I am really allowing opportunity for is self-determination, choice, agency. For her to have a voice.

