

Nurturing Resilience

Too Safe For Their Own Good Michael Ungar, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, Australia, 2007,
review by Sophie Foster www.jumpingbeansbooks.com

“At what age did you move out of your parents’ home?... who moved out at seventeen... eighteen...nineteen?”

A collective giggle filled the Western Springs College library on a balmy summer evening in late November last year, as the roomful of parents, educators, social workers and mental health professionals looked around at each other self-consciously. How could we have ever been competent enough at such a young age to make so many decisions for ourselves!

The question, posed by Dr. Michael Ungar, Principal Investigator with the Resilience Research Centre surprised us, just as it surprises many of his audiences. Visiting New Zealand to launch his book, ‘Too Safe For Their Own Good’, I took the opportunity after his presentation, to introduce myself as director of Jumping Beans, the early childhood sensory-motor development programme, and author of ‘Move Baby Move’ and we exchanged books.

The thesis of Ungar’s book is that our children have a deep-rooted psychological need for risk taking and responsibility seeking that underlies the maturing process. He argues that children who push the limits (and scare us adults in the process) may also be those who are the ones most ready for life. His book explores how to find a balance between keeping our children out of harm’s way while still offering them what they need to experience the thrills that are part of growing up.

On his website www.resilienceresearch.org Ungar defines resilience as: “...both an individual’s capacity to navigate to health resources and a condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide those resources in culturally meaningful ways.” This, he explains, is a progressive definition which shifts our understanding from the more commonly held concept of resilience as “an individual’s ability to overcome adversity and continue his or her normal development” to a more relational understanding of well-being.

Ungar’s research on what it takes to nurture resilient children, is timely and refreshing. While, as parents, we delude ourselves into thinking we’re the ones doing the ‘bringing up’, we have to admit we don’t always know best. Raising parents, Ungar warns, is very difficult! He describes his book as “...much about offering you a new perspective on children as it is a recipe book for helping them stay safe.” His parenting ‘recipes’ are necessarily varied. For, he asserts, parenting is not an exact science and families are too diverse for there ever to be one recipe for success. What works for one child could be disastrous for another. He encourages us to ignore the experts, (himself included) and trust ourselves first as he says that if we act out of love and concern, intend our child no harm and are willing to do what it takes to maintain a relationship with our child, we will, on the whole, do well. The road to success lies in our own self knowledge, flexibility and the courage to really listen to and understand our children in order to encourage the self-expression needed to help them find their talent, passion and uniqueness. Often this means suspending our expectations and allowing our children to lead. Throughout the book Ungar encourages self-reflection on our current parenting practices and provides exercises for us to ‘try something new and do something different’.

Ungar, as a social worker, family therapist, teacher and parent, uses case studies and observations from his own practice and family to illustrate his views, whether from his experiences in ‘monochrome suburbs across the US, Canada and Europe’ or from hands on research with troubled children from as far a field as Palestine, Israel, Colombia, India and rural Tanzania. The world over, Ungar says, children will do whatever they need to do to convince

themselves of what he calls the three 'C's – i.e that they are competent, capable contributors to their communities. While children growing up amid real danger need safer homes, safer streets, immunizations, non-abusive caregivers and hope, for many other more fortunate children, Ungar is concerned that we are providing *'too much safety'* and that we need to find a balance between the 'bubble wrapping' practices of the 'helicopter', over-protective and controlling parents on the one hand, and the *laissez faire*, under-supervised parenting practices on the other. Children denied the parental endorsement of developmentally appropriate risk taking opportunities may engage in their own, oftentimes developmentally inappropriate, unsafe and destructive risk taking of the four 'D's i.e dangerous, delinquent, deviant and disordered behavior.

While Ungar believes that whatever a well-intentioned adult says to a child will be helpful, sometimes our own fears and limitations get in the way of enabling children to find ways of being powerful. Ungar observes the interaction between a mother and her four year old daughter, Tess, in his neighborhood playground. As Tess climbs higher and higher on the monkey bars, her anxious mother cautions harshly from below, threatening to take her home. Tess, enjoying herself too much, ignores her mother's pleas and continues to the top. Looking down, she hears her mother's anxiety and freezes. Pressing herself to the bars, losing stability, she eventually backs down, tears gushing, to a point where her mother pries her away. What could have been an empowering experience served only to undermine Tess's self-confidence.

"When was the last time Tess's mother had climbed monkey bars? Twenty five years ago?" Ungar asks. "Our children need the same kind of challenges we had as kids. But they also need the support of caring adults who can help them cope. Our children are begging us for opportunities to prove themselves."

Ungar's book is an invitation to all of us to listen to our children and communicate in ways that they can understand what we mean. Through engaging in respectful conversations and meaningful experiences with our children, our role as parents is to coach them to take safe risks and develop responsibility because that will facilitate their transition to adulthood and understanding of four powerful messages – that they belong, are trustworthy, responsible and capable – the core to developing resilience.