

Between Teacher & Parent

Helping the child who attempts daredevil activities

“Watch Me Do That!”

The Teacher’s Story

Niam is grumpy again! He’s been sitting on the edge of the sandbox kicking sand at no one in particular. He’s been doing this ever since I coaxed him down from the climber. He’d been holding on with one hand and beckoning his pals to follow him—and that was after he had raced up the ladder, daring them to join in! It’s hard to keep Niam safe. Yesterday, I had to be really firm with him about sitting, rather than standing, on the swing. He refused to play for quite a while after that episode, too, pouting and kicking stones at the edge of our playground.

Niam has been bold about attempting physical feats since his first day here. When school began, he started to stand on the back of a chair to reach something high up on a shelf, despite our rule about always asking a grownup for help in situations like that. And now his daredevil behavior seems to occur daily. It’s remarkable that Niam has had only minor injuries. The 12 inches of sand on our playground softens his falls. His fourth birthday was just last week, but he’s apparently eager to try whatever he sees his 7-year-old brother do. It frustrates Niam when he can’t manage to do something his brother does. Things like that seem to egg him on. I wish I weren’t saying no to him all the time, but Niam doesn’t understand that some things are still beyond his ability to do safely.

The Parent’s Story

I am almost sorry that winter hasn’t arrived yet, because the pleasant fall weather has kept my adventurous 4-year-old free to experiment outdoors. Today, I rescued him and two of his friends as he pulled them in a wagon toward the top of a hill. Yesterday, he fell in the driveway trying to get on his older brother’s two-wheeler. Maybe it’s impatience about not being as accomplished as our 7-year-old that causes Niam to take chances. I know it annoys him to hear us say, “No, not until you’re bigger.” Last summer, for example, Niam’s brother swam across the pond with his uncle and my husband in a small boat alongside him. Niam insisted he could do it, too. He had just learned to doggie paddle, but he thought he was ready for the long swim. Now he wants to climb up to a neighbor’s tree house. After so many skinned knees and elbows, we can’t agree to that. Even if he made it there unharmed, he’d be tempted to dangle over the edge. Niam’s awareness of

danger isn’t as developed as his eagerness for new experiences. What’s more, he is convinced he is perfectly capable of doing anything he wants to do. But safety comes first. I just wish we could get Niam to understand that.

Dr. Brodtkin’s Assessment

Niam may carry it a bit further than most, but the urge to surpass their current skills is not unusual for healthy young children. In fact, without it, they wouldn’t have bothered to crawl, then stand, then walk, and later “climb many Mt. Everests.” Granted, some like

Niam are endowed with such eagerness for mastery that their safety is frequently in jeopardy.

What Can the Teacher Do?

The teacher needs to guide Niam toward safe play that is still enough of a reach to be fun. She can use a positive approach: point out the right way to climb a ladder or use a swing and then ask Niam to demonstrate it to an audience of children. Instead of just calling him down from the climber, she might talk him through it the “safe way,” while the others are asked to pay close attention. She might also have a quiet talk with Niam about being her “safety assistant.” With her close supervision, Niam can help her to clarify the rules, such as no standing on swings, no racing up the ladder, and no hanging off the edge of equipment. It would be helpful if his parents could visit and hear her say that she is counting on Niam to set a good example.

What Can the Parent Do?

Parenting such an energetic and determined 4-year-old is quite a challenge. But like the teacher, the parent can try a positive approach. She can praise Niam for his achievements and willingness to try new things, while reminding him that even his big brother needs to follow safety rules. She can tell stories about when his brother couldn't do many things that he now does easily. She can praise Niam warmly each time he wears a helmet while riding his tricycle or asks her to spot him in an activity. Although Niam is more adventurous than some, he is showing a healthy drive to achieve. Such a child needs room and opportunity for safe play, and until his judgment catches up with his zeal, he also needs his parents' admiring and watchful eyes. ECT

Box: When to Wonder

- If there is a growing increase in anger and irritability on Niam's part when adults set limits.
- If Niam's behavior brings about repeated injury to him and his followers.
- If Niam's behavior becomes even more reckless and worrisome after weeks of working with him, expert intervention may be needed.

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