

### Bicycle Helmets and Seat Belts

It catches the eye to see young children biking without helmets. And it is not much comfort to see the children wearing helmets but their parents biking alongside them without helmets. This was a topic of discussion on an annual bicycle trip to Itasca State Park in northern Minnesota (source of the Mississippi River and home of Minnesota's tallest red pine) recently.

One of the men in our group had the biggest neck and the largest arms of any of us. In fact, he looked like he would be unhurt if he biked into one of Itasca's huge trees. The "big guy" talked about years of bicycle riding as a child and teenager and years of motorcycling as a young adult without helmets and how the first time he put a helmet on was when he was teaching his young son to ride a bicycle. And how he hasn't been biking without a helmet since. One of the women (an Emergency Room physician) grounded us with a few stories of how fragile teenagers, who are so sure of their own invulnerability, actually are.

Some of us can remember moving around freely in the back of our family's station wagon on long road trips and summer vacations. And some of us remember when gas was twenty-five cents per gallon! And we remember when cars equipped with seatbelts were first produced and then years later when seatbelt use became a matter for state legislatures nationwide. We may have stuck our feet out of tailgate windows looking at the road just traveled way back when, but our children have been in car seats and seatbelts their entire lives. Because of this, our children are likely to buckle up automatically when they become drivers. They were watching us show them how adults take care of themselves and now we watch them pull off the driveway with promises to drive safely and be home by 11:00.

And we teach about more than just physical safety through modeling. They do not only watch us teach about physical safety. Our children watch us deal with the everyday ups and downs of home ownership, grocery shopping, money management, and the challenges of careers, marriages and parenting. We are teaching about emotional safety, wellbeing and stress management by our model as well as physical safety.

Our children are lucky, they have us for parents. Some of us grew up with angry parents, judging and critical parents, anxious and worrying parents, intrusive and suffocating parents. Some of us were weakened by our parents' model rather than strengthened.

Since life includes unwanted events, the least we can do is teach our children as best we can how to float through them and stay well. Our children can learn about resilience, optimism and emotional calibration from watching us be resilient, optimistic and live with our emotional lives more or less on an even keel. And the greatest chances for us to teach about taking care of ourselves emotionally are the unwanted moments. These include accidents, illnesses, failures, setbacks, mistakes, disappointments, missed opportunities and forgotten chores. Our children provide us with quite a few of these unwanted moments, no surprise there. And if we are on the lookout for opportunities to teach them about being safe and being well we will not have to look far.

Our children are strengthened by watching us wear our seatbelts and bicycle helmets and by watching us accept each day, even the imperfect ones, by breathing in and out, saying brilliant words like "life includes this," "we'll get through this together," and "let's see what this we can learn from this." We live our lives as models and we teach our children about being safe and well on days that unfold smoothly and on days that do not.

Our children are so lucky. After all, they have us for parents.

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