

RAISING THOUGHTFUL RISK-TAKERS

Rethinking “be careful” and 30 things to tell your kids instead

“BE CAREFUL!” As soon as a child is on the move, the words seem to flow right out of our mouths. And for good reason! A child’s safety is the top priority of every parent and caretaker. A toddler climbs onto the sofa. *Be careful!* A preschooler descends from the top of the jungle gym. *Be careful!* A child reaches for a full glass off the counter. *Be careful!*

The problem with “be careful” isn’t the intent but a lack of context describing what a child *should* be paying attention to. Without specific, tangible advice, how are we helping them develop the skills needed to negotiate risk independently? Telling a child to “be careful” when crossing the street is less meaningful than reminding them that cars drive fast and may not always be looking out for people and that they need to look left, right, and left again before crossing.



It’s not to say that those two words never serve a purpose, but consider how “be careful” moments could instead be learning opportunities. By using different words, we can show kids that we trust their judgment and teach them situational awareness, help them practice problem-solving, and build their confidence. And that can all be accomplished while keeping them as safe as necessary, rather than as safe as possible.

Today, more than ever, kids need increased opportunities for risky play, especially outdoors. Research has shown that it improves self-confidence, executive function, self-regulation, and creativity and even *reduces* the risk of injury.¹ By reeling in our “*be carefuls,*” we’re reminded that less is often more when it comes to intervening in kids’ play.

1. Brussoni, M., Ishikawa, T., Brunelle, S., and Herrington, S., 2017. Landscapes for play: Effects of an intervention to promote nature-based risky play in early childhood centers. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 54, pp.139-150.

Try **empowering** your kids to be thoughtful risk-takers with these **“be careful” alternatives**:

1. **Take your time** ... *coming down the ladder.*
2. **Do you feel confident** ... *jumping, or would you like me to lift you down?*
3. **Let me know if you'd like my help** ... *getting up that hill.*
4. **Be aware of** ... *how slick the rocks are when they're wet.*
5. **Notice how** ... *close your feet are getting to this steep edge.*
6. **Be mindful of** ... *how much younger and smaller that kid you are playing with is.*
7. **Focus on** ... *carrying that object with two hands because it's pretty heavy.*
8. **Do you feel stable** ... *balancing on that log?*
9. **Anticipate that** ... *bikers may come around these turns quickly.*
10. **What's your next move** ... *climbing that tree?*
11. **Do you trust your body to** ... *jump and land in a safe position?*
12. **Are you comfortable** ... *reaching for the next monkey bar on your own?*
13. **What speed do you need to move at** ... *to stay safe on the pool deck?*
14. **Observe how** ... *the dog's body language is changing.*
15. **Is there a gentler way** ... *you could share that toy?*
16. **Try using** ... *your legs to push instead of pushing with your arms.*
17. **What steps do you need to take** ... *before you can cross the street safely?*
18. **Try adjusting** ... *your body weight farther back on your bike when you go down the hill.*
19. **Remember that** ... *we don't have an extra pair of dry socks if you step in that water.*
20. **Check that your surroundings are clear** ... *before you swing that stick.*
21. **What do you think might happen if** ... *they come down the slide while you're going up?*
22. **Please find an area with more space** ... *to throw that ball.*
23. **Do you think it's a better idea** ... *to carry both plates at once or one at a time?*
24. **Be cognizant of** ... *cars backing out of their driveways while you're on the sidewalk.*
25. **Can you see** ... *how the steam coming out of that pot reminds you how hot it is?*
26. **Can you hear** ... *the recycling truck coming around the corner?*
27. **This environment isn't safe because** ... *that broken glass is sharp.*
28. **Pay attention** ... *to the distance between us when you're on your scooter.*
29. **How could you check first** ... *to see if that ice is frozen enough to walk on?*
30. **Have you observed** ... *how the thunder and lightning are getting closer together?*