

afraid of the Ragman?

Ballad of The Ragman

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I was walking on the river path a while ago and came upon an incredible hillside of Mexican hats, wild orange and yellow flowers that made me stop and breathe in their beauty. I was alone and wanted to share my discovery with someone, so I went up to a young boy on a bike and started telling him about the hillside just ahead, and where he could find the flowers. But before I finished, I noticed his face becoming rigid, and he said, "I'm not alone, you know. My friend is coming on the trail behind me. See there! I'm not alone."

His fear of me, a grandmotherly sort of person with a smile and substantial shoes, erased

all the joy I had gleaned from my wild flower discovery. All I could think was "What have we done to our children, in the name of safety?"

How often have I stood in the post office line or the grocery store and tried to talk to someone else's children, while they hid behind their mother's leg? All of us know about kidnappings and abuse. I am a mother and a counselor and understand these things all too well. But have we gone too far in teaching our children to be afraid?

A child's brain develops until around age 24. We now know that when children consistently register fear in their environment, the brain creates lifelong pathways that become automatic. These fear responses are especially triggered by anything different, such as people of other races, cultures, religions, and those speaking different languages. The fear center of our brain (the amygdala) hijacks our ability to think clearly or even compassionately.

Fear negates fun. Fear negates community. Fear can lead to anxiety and/or depression. Fear of people who are different can lead to prejudice and narrowing of minds. We know as parents that we need to teach our children "healthy fear." But what does that mean?

Talk to your children. Introduce them to people who are different from your family. Teach

them to ask questions before judging. Then when their questions have been answered, teach them to trust. George Vaillant, Harvard psychiatrist, has found a strong relationship between the positive emotions of joy, trust and love, and "post-crisis resilience."

I wrote the children's book *The Ballad of the Ragman* as a vehicle for parents to discuss this topic. In the book a raggedy old man collects thrown away things, fixes them, and then returns them as new, and a child learns that crazy, funny looking people can be compassionate. The book's website contains discussion questions and projects for parents, as well as a teacher's guide.

It is not easy to balance violence in the world with compassion for people we don't know. But if you as parent, aunt, uncle, teacher, grandparent or friend, give a child the tools to do just that, it may be the work you are most proud of.

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October book signings for The Ballad of the Ragman are: Sat., Oct. 31, 11-1, Steve's Sundries; Sat., Nov. 7, Borders, 41st & Yale, 2 p.m.

Tips for Encouraging Trust

1. When a parent or trusted adult IS PRESENT, encourage the child to reach out to others, even those who are different, and ask them questions about their own story.
2. Teach your child that "different" doesn't have to mean "scary."
3. Have your child check out library books about people who are different.
4. Teach your child "When in doubt, ask a trusted adult."
5. Remember that kidnappings are very rare, and most involve family members.
6. Teach your child to report to you ANY strange conversations or happenings, so you may help the child evaluate the situation, and/or respond to it.
7. Be a good role model for your child. That is the best way for him/her to learn appropriate behavior.