

Security

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Benjamin never commented on our security system until one day when he was three. We were leaving for day care, and as he watched me push the buttons on the keypad, he began asking questions. My policy was to be truthful with my son, as long as the truth was developmentally appropriate. I responded to each question with that in mind.

“What are those buttons?”

“They turn on the alarm.”

“What’s an alarm?”

“It’s a big noise that comes if someone goes into our house when we’re not here.”

“Why do we have that?”

“So that only the people we invite into our house can come in.”

As soon as I answered one question, a new one took its place.

“What happens if the alarm goes off?”

“The police will come and take that person away.”

“Why would someone try to come into our house?”

Before I knew it, we were heading into scary territory, and I had already said too much: “Well, sometimes bad people try to break into houses so they can steal things.”

Preoccupied as I was with getting out of the house and getting to work on time, I failed to register Benjamin’s reaction to this information until we were buckled in and driving down 50th Street. Then the questions resumed, with more urgency:

“Could bad people get into our house?”

“Why do they want to steal things?”

“How could they get in if the door is locked?”

I glimpsed Benjamin’s worried eyes in the rearview mirror, and then he looked away, staring out the window while he formulated his next question.

By this time, I was backpedaling, offering less-than-truthful answers: “No bad people can get into our house because we lock all the doors when we leave. They know we have an alarm, so they’d never try to come in.” I tried to reassure him that our house was safe. But he would not be reassured; he was moving toward a deeper conclusion:

“You mean there’s bad people in Minnesota? Where do they live? Do they have guns? How long do they have to stay in jail? Why don’t the police just shoot them?”

As I searched for acceptable answers to these questions, a blanket of sadness settled over me. I realized that this conversation marked the end of a certain kind of innocence for my three year old. Never again would he assume that everyone in his world had good intentions. I knew that this was an inevitable part of growing up, but why did I have to be the cause of this loss, the main contributor to this darkening of his

world view? Why had I not stopped before it came to “bad people,” or invented some happy explanation for the buttons on the keypad? The questions continued all the way to day care. That night, Benjamin wanted extra bedtime stories, and insisted that I stay with him until he fell asleep. In the days that followed, I wondered, was it just my imagination, or was he introducing bad guys into his pretend play for the first time? He seemed to be working through it, but I was grieving.

I recalled the loss of my own innocence. When I was 7, I began reading the whole Sunday newspaper, not just the comics. One week, I read the front page story of a girl my age who had been kidnapped, raped, and murdered, her nude body left in a trashcan in a neighborhood less than ten miles from my suburban home. I would not understand what “raped” meant until I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* a few years later, but I certainly knew what “murdered” was. This was the first time I became aware that children could be killed on purpose, and this knowledge shook me to the core. I remember reading the newspaper story over and over, trying to understand how this could happen, and fighting the simultaneous attraction and revulsion I felt when I read the awful details. This event was not the kind of thing my parents talked about, and somehow I sensed that I could not ask them about it, so it became a reality with which I struggled alone. I was haunted by the story and felt unsafe in my bed many nights after that. Like Benjamin, I could no longer assume that my world was inhabited by adults with only good intentions.

After I stumbled into delivering the message that stole some of my young son’s innocence, I mourned again for the carefree child that I once was. I felt the ambivalence that many parents experience over bringing our children into an imperfect and often

unsafe world. At the center of it all was my regret over being unable to give my child a world without so much suffering.

Several months later, Benjamin had a new set of urgent questions. This time they arose out of his first experience with death. His grandmother's best friend, a woman he knew, was killed in a car accident, and he happened to be within earshot when his grandmother received the news. Although Bob and I explained to him what had happened, he didn't begin asking questions until a few days later. At first they were the typical questions a child asks about death: What is dead? Why did she die? Can she come back? Where is she now? We offered standard answers, and they satisfied him momentarily, but we could see the wheels turning in his mind. The next questions were more difficult: Would his grandmother die? How old could a person get? Would we, his parents, die? We tried to strike a balance between truthful and reassuring. Yes, we would die someday, but not until he was all grown up and we were very, very old.

He was quiet, considering this, and then the darkest shadow crossed his face, and he began to sob. His small body shook with sobbing, and no words could come out. We comforted him and tried to help him put into words what was so upsetting. But the conclusion that our very logical, verbal child had reached in his mind was simply unspeakable. He continued to cry, enormous tears pouring out of his deep blue eyes, a profound sadness overtaking him. Finally, Bob asked, "Are you thinking that you will die someday?" Benjamin nodded, then crawled into his father's lap, burying his face in Bob's flannel shirt, and let himself be held and rocked for the longest time.