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Get out of the way: Letting young people discover what they can do

This week, I have been spending my days in a room full of 10- to 13-year-olds and a lot of butter, flour, and sugar.

It is Blissful Baking camp week at Streams Community Hub, which means I am doing what I do every summer: teaching young people how to measure, mix, knead, bake, decorate, problem-solve and, inevitably, recover from whatever did not go according to plan.

There is something about working so closely with kids that reminds me of how capable they are and keeps me grounded in why we built Streams in the first place.

Give them real tools. Give them clear instructions. Give them a little time. Then, and this may be the hardest part for us adults, get out of the way.

They will surprise you.

I have spent a lot of my adult life around young people. I lead an organization built around them, and at home I am raising three of my own, now 15, 13 and almost 11. Between parenting and Streams, I have had a front-row seat to thousands of moments when a child is learning something for the first time ? and to the adults around them.

We mean well. We want to help, to protect, to save time. We can see the mistake coming from three steps away, and every fibre of our experienced adult bodies wants to swoop in and prevent it. Sometimes we should. But I wonder whether, in our eagerness to protect children from struggle, we sometimes protect them from discovering what they can do.

I learned this early with my oldest daughter, Akeylah. She was five when she started musical theatre. I remember watching her perform and weeping ? not polite little tears, but overwhelmed by the skill, the passion, the precision, and the completely unselfconscious joy with which she performed.

Had someone asked me beforehand whether my five-year-old was ready for musical theatre, there is a good chance I would have said no. ?She's too young.? ?Maybe next year.? And I would have been wrong. Worse, my limited view of what a five-year-old was capable of could have robbed her of an experience she was entirely ready to have.

That realization has stayed with me, because I see versions of it constantly. A child reaches for the knife, and an adult says, ?Let me do that.? They struggle with the zipper, the line, the recipe, and we rush in because watching the awkwardness of learning is uncomfortable. We know how to do it already. They do not.

And learning can be painfully inefficient. It wobbles. It spills things. It takes too long. It occasionally produces a cake that leans suspiciously to the left. But that is the process. Before a child can do something confidently, they have to do it uncertainly. Before they can do it well, they may have to do it badly. Before they soar, somebody has to tolerate watching them flap around for a while.

That, increasingly, is what I think our job is ? whether as parents, teachers, coaches, youth workers, or simply adults who have children in our orbit. Not to remove every difficult thing, but to create enough safety for young people to attempt difficult things. To teach, to guide, to supervise where safety requires it, and also to know when to take our hands off. Because capability needs somewhere to reveal itself.

I see that in the baking camp. A 10-year-old does not arrive knowing everything required to make bread or decorate a cake. That is rather the point. But I can give them instruction and responsibility appropriate to their age, then allow them the dignity of doing the work themselves. Sometimes they need help. Sometimes there is flour absolutely everywhere. But very often, what follows is that flicker across a young person's face: I did that.

Not ?someone did it for me.? Not ?I watched an adult do it.? I did that. There is confidence in those three words. There is agency, competence, and the beginnings of knowing oneself as someone who can figure things out. I wish we gave children more opportunities to earn those three words.

Our children are capable of more than we think. That does not mean throwing them into situations they are not developmentally or emotionally ready for. It means being careful that the ceiling we place over them is not actually the ceiling of our own imagination.

Akeylah was not too young. I just did not know yet what she could do. Nearly every day since, some young person has given me another reason to remember that.

So perhaps the invitation for those of us raising, teaching and caring for children is a simple one: resist the urge to decide too quickly what they cannot do. Teach them. Stand nearby. Let them wobble. Then give them the extraordinary gift of finding out for themselves just how capable they are.

At Streams, that is part of the work. We create spaces where young people can try things they have never done before, make mistakes with people nearby who know when to step in and when not to, and experience the enormous satisfaction of realizing, ?I can do this.?

Of course, this asks something of the adults, too. If watching a 10-year-old crack an egg slowly, frost a cake imperfectly, or generally take the scenic route toward competence makes every nerve in your body want to jump in, we understand. You do not have to watch.

You can support Streams instead. Your support helps us give young people the time, tools, guidance and room they need to try, wobble, recover and surprise themselves. So, if you cannot bear to watch the wobble, support the people who can. You can learn how at streamshub.org.

This week's Community Voice column was written by Juli-Anne James, executive director of Streams Community Hub.