

JD Andrews Institute Presents
'Words of Wisdom' with Ruth Anne Hammond



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On Risk

Host: Good morning.

Audience: Good morning.

Host: Happy to see you. Today's topic is risk. That might seem like an odd topic for a conversation about parent engagement and communication. **It's our job to do our best for the children in our care. Yes, and to do that we need to build good bridges with the families. As we become aware of the distance between our role and theirs and our perspective and theirs and even our culture and theirs, we start seeing how important it is to begin right away to build that bridge.** There's a lot of risk in building the bridge.

But we have to be up for the challenge, that's part of the responsibility that we have and there's just no chance that we can develop healthy habits and help families give their children healthy habits without risk and there's no human development without risk. When you think about it, it's one of those uncomfortable truths and it's like a Russian Doll. There are multiple layers and the child has to take risks. Anything a baby puts into her mouth might taste bad, might be sharp. Anything he pulls down off the shelf might bonk him on the head. Any kind of social interaction he has could end in disappointment.

For parents, the risk is extreme too. They may feel any help they give their child might make the child more dependent. At the same time not helping might leave them feeling abandoned. Parents have risks and then teachers have risks too because as you reach out to parents, it's possible that you could say the wrong thing and they could take it the wrong way and you might make matters worse. At the same time, if you don't say something, you might get blamed for the failure to intervene. There's a lot going on there, and we just have to be willing to reach out.

Why is it so hard for some people to take a risk? Maybe seemingly easy for other people. Everybody has a particular orientation, we're all somewhere on the spectrum and there are several different reasons for that. The first one is **temperament**. We know that some people are just people that push the boundaries. We all know people like that. Then there are people that are more cautious and they have to work harder to build up their courage to take risks.

Speaker 1: What kind of risks are we talking about? Are we talking about physical risks like riding a motorcycle or an emotional risk like inviting someone out for coffee or asking a question?

Host: Absolutely. We're really talking about emotional risks right now but that crash and burn feeling, yes, that can come into even emotional risks too. What if it's a stupid question? Right? What if your idea gets laughed at in a meeting? What if you

say something and they take it the wrong way? It takes courage, you have to be brave to take risks. Then there's another factor that comes in and that's **development**. Right? Because as we develop we become more able to assess the risks, the risk benefit and know what might happen down the road.

As we develop, we might get more cautious or we might get more brave, depending. Then there's **experience**. As you gain more experience, you start to be able to predict a little bit better what might happen if you do this or if you do that. You might find there are benefits to the risk. You might be trying out for a cheerleader, you might fall on your head in front of the whole school. Been there, done that. **But from that you might learn resilience. You might actually win.** These are the kinds of things that experience does for us, but what's interesting is you might think that experience and development are the same thing.

But they're not. Right? Because the same experience is going to have different effects on you based on where you are developmentally. For instance, a little baby might reject the vegetables because she had green peas and choked. Everything green is the devil now. But you wouldn't do that, you have one experience. You're not going to throw out a whole category of food. That's development being key.

Then there's also the perceived sense of one's own power versus the power of the other person. I don't know about you, but I'm much more willing to take a risk with my family or my friends or my co-equal partners whereas with people who have power over me like the police officer or my boss or a teacher who's going to give me a grade, I'm going to be a little bit more cautious about what I say and how I act. **We have to think about our power in relation to the parents.**

There's also this thing of who in the family actually has the final say on things. That's another aspect of power to be thinking about. But mainly, we need to think about our own power and how it relates to the parent's sense of power. **If we are the perceived power person, how are we going to use that power to build equity with them?**

Speaker 2: I get what you're saying. I think that parents put teachers on a pedestal and that's great, but there's a lot of pressure then and a lot of responsibility and on the other hand, some parents use the power position and they know that their private school tuition is covering our salary. That can be tricky, but you have to know that your experience is enough.

Host: Privilege makes it easier to take risks. We all have our own orientation to risk and I'm wondering if anybody has a little story they might be willing to share about a time when they were in a risky situation.

Speaker 3: I remember when my daughter was starting kindergarten and she had to start getting on the bus and I was so nervous because I'm putting her on the bus, she is going on the opposite side of town and I'm going to work in the other direction. I was concerned and at orientation there was this teacher, the teacher was really confident and shared a story jokingly about she said, "Well, we've misplaced a kid or two but we've never lost one." Even though that didn't make me feel completely

comfortable, I did recognize that they had a plan in place and it made me feel better and trust that things would be okay.

Host: She wasn't pretending that you don't need to be worried at all. She recognized that you were feeling it was a risky situation and you appreciated that.

Speaker 3: Yes.

Host: Love of a child gives a whole new meaning to the idea of risk. Yes. That's what parents start off with and in our care. That they're having to get used to the idea of leaving their child in the care of someone else, what if that person doesn't feed them? Right. What if they let the child fall and get hurt? We have this protective urge that's foundational to our nature. It's like a song that I love from Sweeney Todd, 'nothing's going to harm you not while I'm around.' Right? That's how we feel as parents.

It's naturally there for parents to not really trust the teachers or the caregivers until they have evidence that those people are going to live up to the trust. Right? There's an optimal level of separation anxiety that parents have. If they don't have it, they don't choose the best care for their children. Being a little bit anxious is actually a very good thing. We want to see that parents are being vigilant, it's a good thing. Where we meet parents is in this very vulnerable position. The parents are handing over their precious child to us, but by the same token, we're in a risky situation too. It's a big risk to take on responsibility for somebody else's children.

Speaker 2: I worry about that. If something bad were to happen on my watch, I don't know if I could ever forgive myself.

I'd have to leave the fields.

Speaker 1: Yes. I think I feel the same way.

Host: Yes. It's a very fraught moment of risk when we come together and how do we bridge that gap? How do we get past that mutual terror that might be happening as we accept the children into our programs? There's a really beautiful concept of communion. We are wired to worry, but we're also wired to connect.

Getting into communion with another person starts to build that trust that we're needing and what that really means is really authentic relationship. Opening yourself, being vulnerable to the other person not feeling like you need to have something to say every second or that you could just be together, that you could just let some topics if they're on the table for a while and just be.

Speaker 4: We always try to smile and laugh in the classroom because we would like to build a sense of communion. In the children, they can get easy and get together. Get to know together. When was this day, we were having a snack and we went to this table. This little boy come very excited. He got a celery stick. He said, "Oh, this look a number one." He was so exciting he ate it. With the grandma came

to pick it up, I told her about the study and he not only is learning his numbers, but at the same time, he was able to eat the vegetable.

Grandma was so impressed and very happy, said, "I am very proud of my baby."

Speaker 5: I like to go over the families each year to connect and to be part of that same community. Take a food basket as a gesture that how much I want these families to connect with me so we can build a relationship. A healthy relationship.

Host: Oh, that's a great way to start. That's beautiful. **Once you start finding that communion you can begin to collaborate.** Where you pick a shared goal for the child that both parent and teacher will work on together. One day, I was telling my families at school a story about my own parenting foibles. I won't go into that right now, but there are many. A little while later, one of the moms came up to me off in the corner privately and started telling me that she was having a hard time getting her little boy **[00:13:00]** to eat and she was worried about that. She said what she does is feed him while he's watching cartoons onscreen.

Oh, okay. He's sitting there. He's like it's a little zombie self. **With his mouth and he can't open it** and his eyes glazed over and she's there with the spoon feeding him. I was like, "Okay, don't get all judgmental. Just calm down. Just be chill." Okay, but in my heart, I know that it's not the best way to feed a child because you want the child to pay attention to their hunger and to have some sense that they're in control of what they eat. The mom was worried because he's a pretty tiny thin little guy at this point and she's worried that he's too thin. I think, "Well, you know what, he's really energetic. He doesn't seem lethargic. He seems like he's getting enough calories to me to fuel his somewhat small body." Maybe he wouldn't have been so then if she wasn't working so hard to get him to eat. That's what I'm thinking.

Speaker 4: Where I come from, it is the mother's job to get the food into the child by whatever means necessary. Well, she will get a load of grief from the grandparents and other members of the family if the child is thin.

Host: Right. That's exactly what this mother said. She said her mom wanted her to force-feed him. What she was doing was actually nicer in a way of non-confrontational feed him while he's not paying attention, but that still doesn't feel right to me. At the same time, I know I'm sitting there talking to myself about not judging, about listening to the other person's point of view. I'm assessing the risk because it's risky if I'm going to start telling her what she's supposed to be doing. Maybe my point of view is ethnocentric. I don't know. She did seem interested in discussing it or she wouldn't have brought it up. I said, "Well, you know, if you're interested in finding a different way, I do have some ideas for you." She said, "Yes. Let me hear them."

I told her that in my family, in my home, and at school, I follow Magda Gerber's caveat that the adult decides what and when the child will eat and the child decides if and how much. The adult is taking responsibility for setting the schedule based on what they know of the child's hunger cycles and the menu so that all of the foods being offered are healthy choices. The child gets to choose whether or not they're going to put that in their mouth and chew it and swallow it. It's really about trusting

the child. That's how I fed my children and that's how the kids at school get fed, with a caring adult who sits there with them and offers them free choice of the foods that are present.

She decided to come and observe her child at our mealtime. She hid in the corner and watched and she was very surprised to see him come to the table just like the other children. He came a little later because he's one of those kids who likes to finish his project. He finished his project and he would come to the table and sit down and eat and he even tried a few new things. She was really surprised and really pleased. Yes.

Speaker 3: Did she try the same routine at home?

Host: She did, yes, and she had really good results. When she stopped trying too hard to get him to eat, he started being more interested in eating when she trusted him. It was a really good result and I was really happy that I had had the courage for myself to go out and tell her what I thought might help. The mom could have rejected my ideas. She could have gotten offended and then I would have had to figure out how to come back to her and repair our communion. Okay. There's an important psychological theory that I think comes into play here and it's **Allan Schore's regulation theory** which is the combination of attachment theory and neuroscience.

By studying the brain and psychology, he's figured out that self-regulation which is what we all want for children to become self-regulated, it's a combination of autoregulation where the person is handling it inside themselves with no outside influence. Then co-regulation or interactive regulation, where you need a partner and so that's the adult's job with relation to children is that you're the co-regulator. The feeding relationship is interactively regulated between the adult and the child. That's what the mom started to see is that she needed to trust her child and give him a little autonomy about his eating. He would be ready to take responsibility and eat well when she wasn't there. It worked out well because we'd already built that communion and we were then able to collaborate.

Speaker 4: I liked those words communion and collaboration. I think of it as cooperation where each person recognizes the others area of expertise and respect the other's role. That's where we can both feel good. We try to practice that at my center.

Host: That's great. Yes, and that is what happens, but unfortunately we can't always feel good. I hate that, but it's true because **relationships are messy**. They're messy at home and they're messy at work. We have to get used to the idea that we can live with that. That we're not trying to have all the edges patted down all the time and that we have these perfect moments all the time and feel comfortable with that. What really helps with that is another idea from neuroscience which is **rupture and repair that the quality of a relationship isn't about there'll never being ruptures, but rather what is the quality of the repair when that happens**. If we blow it sometimes which we will because we're human, we can take responsibility and apologize. Make ourselves vulnerable. It's really hard to do that because then you're admitting that you're wrong and that's a huge risk because we could lose status or something. **But that's what we have to do is we have to step back from always**

needing to be right. Admitting when we're wrong takes courage. One of the things I love that Magda Gerber used to say was that we have to give to the adults what we want them to give to the children. For instance, if I'm having a morning parent meeting, if I want them to give their children healthy food I'm not going to give the parents doughnuts. I'm going to give them an oatmeal buffet instead.

That concept also works with qualities like patience and giving time and allowing even the grownups to learn by experience. We're not thinking that they should get our concepts on the first try, for instance. With the children, we are taking responsibility to make the bridge, to repair some rupture if something's happened during the day and we want to do the same thing with the adults. If I'm having a conflict over some tricky topic like sugary snacks or drinks and the parent has decided that I've overstepped my bounds, and I can tell that they're a little ticked off at me.

One of the things that's really helpful for Magda's ideas is to **just accept their feelings. Just acknowledge the fact that they have a right to feel what they feel, we don't have to fix their feelings. We just have to live with them, tolerate them. Be open to what the person is feeling and just to wait. We don't have to go so fast to try to fix it immediately.**

Speaker 4: How this stuff is getting easier over time? As I'm getting older and my parents are younger and is more success. I can feel I can take more chances because I know it will be a very successful making decision.

Host: Yes, communion, collaboration, and cooperation build trust and when we have that trust built, it gets a lot easier to talk about those difficult topics.

Speaker 6: That all sounds great, but it's not always that easy. I have some parents get upset with me because I took the dessert out of the lunch and we have a no dessert policy.

Host: You can never know what's inside another person. You don't know what kind of a week they've had or what kind of a day they've had. You're bringing up a really important topic which is timing because we might have something really important to say that's also going to be really helpful. If we say it at the wrong time, it's going to fall on deaf ears, they're not going to hear us at all. We might just overwhelm them, we might make their holds family life worse if we step in at the wrong moment. Finding that opening is an intuitive process where you just have to, "Okay, this is something that needs to be talked about."

But when is the right time to do it? And you just listen to your intuition. Then the right moment will open up so that you can broach that difficult topic and take that risk in a moment that will be more accepted. If it's an important enough topic, it's worth waiting to find that right moment. There are times to take risks and times to hold back and it rests on a judgment call, an intuitive sense of whether or not the time is right. The question that we have to ask

ourselves and I really think this is the key question, is there a danger of not speaking out higher than of taking a risk.