

Tales of a Clumsy Boy



WHEN MY SON, GIDEON, WAS ABOUT THREE, I began to realize that he was somewhat – actually, very – clumsy. Things went flying in his wake. He constantly fell down or became dislodged from whatever perch he happened to be on. And he showed no sign of the sense of self-preservation that is instinctive to most of us.

Visits to playgrounds were anxiety-filled events for his father and me. While other parents watched from a bench as their three- and four-year-olds mounted the baby slide by themselves, one of us would be following Gideon up the seven or eight steps, knowing that if we didn't, there was a good chance he and the slide would part company, and he'd hurtle downward onto the unsuspecting children behind him.

Despite the challenge presented by the baby slide, Gideon deemed it “boring” and begged to be allowed to go on the “big slide.” We held off until he was four, but one day when Gideon and I were at the park alone and it was fairly quiet, I gave in. After all, the best way for him to get over his clumsiness was to spend lots of time tuning his gross motor skills, and, besides, children younger than he was frequently went on the three- to four-metre slide.

It was a nerve-racking trip up. The steps rose at a steep angle, and I don't like heights. But we made it to the top, where I ensured that Gideon was seated properly for the downward journey – legs straight out in front of him, hands away from the sides, sitting upright. As I let go of him, I felt a surge of relief, feeling that the opportunity for mishap was past. But it wasn't. Halfway down the slide, Gideon suddenly went flying over the edge. Fortunately, sand cushioned his fall and his only injury was a bloody nose. But it could have been so much worse, and for a while we stayed clear of the big slide.

It was the following year that I realized the danger that ponds posed for Gideon. I was at Toronto's Riverdale Park with my cousin and her family. There was a pond

at the bottom of the hill, and her children and mine started to run toward it. I set off in pursuit, but my cousin told me not to worry, they'd be fine, and gently suggested I was being overprotective. “Yes,” I thought. “She's right.” So I stopped and watched from a distance. The children arrived at the pond and came to a halt at its edge – well, all except Gideon, who wasn't able to stop himself in time and went straight into the muddy March water.

That wasn't the only time Gideon fell into a pond. Once in kindergarten he was invited to play with his friend Shannon. At the end of the afternoon, Shannon's mother returned him – wearing Shannon's clothes (dark pink pants and a fetching turtleneck patterned with little pink roses). There was a fish pond in their backyard, and Gideon had managed to fall into it. Shannon and her other friends played in the backyard all the time, her apologetic mother explained, and they'd never come close to falling in.

The young Gideon on a bicycle was a sight to behold. He could balance on a bike and propel it forward, but he didn't seem to be able to control where it went. Consequently, he spent a lot of time bumping into things and, if not actually colliding with people, then at least causing them to run frantically out of his way. When he was about seven, we decided that we should make a concerted effort to help him learn to ride a bike safely. With that in mind, we went on a cycling trip on Quebec's P'tit Train du Nord trail, which runs for 200 kilometres through the Laurentians on a disused railway right-of-way.

We outfitted Gideon with as much

protective gear as we could without inhibiting his ability to ride – gloves, knee and elbow pads, wrist guards, padded hockey shirt and helmet – and set off eagerly that first morning. Progress was painfully slow. Gideon would mount his bike, ride for about 10 metres and then suddenly veer off into the bushes on one side of the trail or the other. Cyclists approaching would look in alarm and stop to help him. But being well padded and quite used to falling, he would be up before they reached him and ready to try again. Persistence paid off. By the end of the trip, he had learned to steer and could ride for many kilometres without stopping. Then there was the challenge of learning to moderate speed. But that's another story.

It used to be that friends would tell me jovially that Gideon would overcome his clumsiness in time. He's 13 now and continues to have what his grade 4 teacher referred to as “physical misadventures.” A few months ago, for example, he went on a well-supervised camping trip and managed to fall down a seven-metre cliff. I suppose the one good thing to say about Gideon's frequent falling is that he's learned how to land.

Reading Tim Hearn's essay on safety in this issue of the *Review* got me thinking about the fact that despite Gideon's trials, his mishaps have never resulted in a broken limb or even stitches. And I have to say that part of the reason for this is that I work for a company that places tremendous emphasis on safety, and identifying risks and finding ways to deal with them (and helping Gideon do the same) has become ingrained in me. And I'm pleased to report that last year, when Gideon decided to build a “pig chair” for an art project and needed to use the electric jig saw, he managed to do so without incident (albeit under a watchful eye).

I should add that Gideon's interesting physical style is balanced by many attributes, one of which is that he's a good sport and good-naturedly gave his permission for this piece to be written. – Sarah Lawley