

COMMENTARY

Fearless kid becomes overprotective father

As a kid, safety isn't always at the top of the priority list. In fact, I don't even remember it being on the list, especially during summer. But that was a long time ago.

Family trips began with the piling of everything from sand toys to coolers up on top of a station wagon — a tribute to vehicular length and artificial wood paneling.

The only "car-seats" we hopped into were the ones way in the back that folded up out of the floor, one facing the other. We were so far from the front of the car, we almost couldn't hear the driver's commands of "Stop touching your cousin!" or "Stay on your side of the car!" or my personal favorite, "I swear, I'll turn this car around!"

And seatbelts? Even if your car did have such new-fangled extras, you couldn't expect a kid to administer an effective slug-bug punch when tethered to the seat. Heck, the only time we were seated was when we stopped to guess what it was that just flew off the top of our car.

These days, we secure our children into containers as suitable for subpace travel as a trip to the store. I've been on roller-coasters with less complicated restraints than these things.

And it's not just one. It's one for every stage of childhood. I've got more "seats" in my attic than chairs in my living room.

Generally speaking, summer was all about your bike. Back then, the "ride from Mom" hadn't been invented yet.

If you wanted to get somewhere, it was pedal power. It didn't matter that it was 35 miles away, through three Chicago suburbs, across dozens of major streets and one interstate highway.

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The list of necessities for such a bike trip included, hmmm, let's see, your bike! The only time you had a place to pack anything else was when one of your buddies was riding his sister's bike (the one with the big banana seat and the little white basket) because he left his own bike in the driveway and his dad ran it over with a Buick.

And helmets? I'm pretty sure those hadn't been invented yet, either.

Today's a different story, though. Daughter No. 1 asks, "Daddy, can I bike to the park with my friends?"

My response is, "Sure. Have you got your helmet? And a watch? And a walkie-talkie? Better take Mommy's cell phone. What about a first-aid kit? GPS? Flare gun?"

And then there are the pre-departure reminders.

Daddy: "When you get to an intersection, you ...?"

Daughter No. 1: "Stop and look."

Daddy: "Where do you look?"

Daughter No. 1: "Both ways."

Daddy: "What are you looking for?"

Daughter No. 1: "Idiots."

Daddy: "And?"

Daughter No. 1: "Maniacs. Daaaaaaady! I gotta go!"

But I'm not done yet. I hear myself saying things like, "Go put on some shoes. I don't care what little Susie Smartiepants is wearing!"

But I do care what the other kids are wearing. A stroll through Darboy's recent Chickenfest had me playing a game I call "Now there's an outfit my daughters will never wear" (also called "Gee, I wonder where that girl changed clothes after she left the house?").

The boys are already following the girls around like little kids chasing the ice-cream truck. Does the ice cream really need to be hanging out the window with the wrapper halfway off?

Arrggghhh! What's happened to me? Did the care-free kid grow up to be a protection-crazed father? I decided it was time to find out.

"Daughter No. 1," I asked, "do you think I'm overprotective?"

Without hesitation, she replied, "Yup."

And it hit me. Maybe I was going too far. Maybe I did need to relax a little. I gave her a hug and told her I would try to ease up a bit.

"Well then," she asked, "can I go biking in my flip-flops today?"

And with my arm still on her shoulder, I replied, "What are you, nuts? You could catch your toes in your bike chain and slice them right off! You want to be the kid with no toes?"

Well what? I said I'd try!

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