

Adult Essay Winner

Learning the Ropes

By Sarah Wang

A few years ago, I took my two elementary school-age kids to a ropes course. My son and daughter were what the pediatrician described as “cautious.” They loved rules and a sticker chart. They didn’t do daredevil stunts on the playground, or sneak the iPad into their rooms, or need the occasional stitch or X-ray.

As a newish parent, this seemingly delightful behavior made me...nervous. How would they learn grit without pushing their limits? Weren’t they supposed to be wrestling and talking back and generally being naughty?

I saw the ropes course as the perfect learning opportunity. Dangling 30 feet over the forest floor with nothing but a rope, a helmet and their wits, they would dig deep and find their inner tough guys.

Instead, my son excitedly asked me to explain what was in the waiver that I signed. Both kids delighted in the warning video and training session that took place firmly planted on the ground.

They both cautiously followed every course regulation while clipping in to the ropes and moving between platforms. There were no close calls, no moments of internal courage or bravery; just lots of rules-following and the occasional waving for a picture.

Before heading home, we stopped for a snack at the picnic tables beside the ropes course. We sat down next to a noisy birthday party. The table was filled with a dozen or so second graders, tired and sweaty from climbing, and hopped up on sugar and the thrill of being around distracted parents.

We were just finishing up when we noticed a commotion at the next table. Two little girls screamed while the other kids scrambled over each other to run away. I glanced over and locked eyes with a chubby, ruddy-cheeked blond-haired boy waving his arm in the air, gripping the head of a large black snake in his hand.

“IT’S A POISONOUS COBRA! AGHHHH,” he yelled, laughing and waving around a fat, nearly 3-foot-long black snake like a miniature Southern preacher, handling a serpent and speaking in tongues to demand his friends’ attention.

The adults were paralyzed. One pulled out her phone: “Wait, it’s not poisonous, it’s just a garter snake, I think, or garden snake, oh my God!” A man reluctantly ran after the boy while yelling at him to put the snake down. “Or throw it? I don’t know!” he yelled.

My kids and I hightailed it back to our car.

“First of all,” my son said in his most authoritative voice as we pulled onto the highway, “it’s GARTER snake, not garden snake. Second, that was not a cobra. It was a black rat snake, native to Maryland and not venomous. There are no cobras in Maryland.”

“Shyeah,” said my daughter.

My kids chatted the whole way home. I drove silently, thinking how relieved I was that the snake wasn’t venomous. I thought about how the snake boy was wild and brave, and how my kids were cautious, and how the world needed them all.