



RAISING *healthy* children BY JOAN WALKER

**Educators from Carolina Friends School, in Durham,
explore the relationship between health and education.**

learning real coping skills

Climber, the Sky Class rat, died recently. Her sister and companion, Rocket, had died last summer. Climber developed a tumor. During her last months, I thought about taking her to my house to stay, wanting to protect the kids from the experience of her declining health. But then I asked myself: what message would that send to the children? Would I be communicating that old, sick animals or people should be stuck away, out of sight? The realities of illness and death are part of life. Isn't it my job as a teacher to help students learn how to live fully and deal with the challenges of life? If I shield my students from this, am I really doing my job?

Teaching often raises complex questions that do not always have simple answers. Every day brings its own challenges. We want to create a safe, supportive learning environment for our students. Yet we do not want to cocoon them in a world so protective that they do not learn real world coping skills. The key is finding the balance.

I remember years ago being confronted by an angry parent. "I thought this was a Quaker school! That child hit my child!" I weighed what words to say. Yes, this is a Quaker school. Our goal is that our students learn to settle conflicts non-violently. But they are children, with all the emotions, urges, and impulses that children have. They often make mistakes, and they learn from those mistakes. So children will at times hit, call names, threaten others, brag, intimidate, and do many other things that we would like them not to do. When they do these things, we will work with them on taking responsibility for their behavior, examining the behavior, and recognizing what problems the behavior causes in turn. We will communicate clearly that this behavior is damaging to our community. We will

work with them on what other choices they can make. At the same time, with all of our students, we will work on their standing up for themselves, asserting their rights and feelings, and dealing with someone who by physical or verbal actions makes them feel unhappy or unsafe. These things are just as much a part of our curriculum as reading and science.

We live in a complex world. In that world we need to deal with realities such as life and death, prejudice and unfairness, not always getting what we want, and much more. We need to be able to work and cooperate with people of different gender, race, ethnicity, and religion from us. We need to be able to get along with people who may not share all our values. Our children will not learn how to do that if we work too hard to protect them. Again we need to find the balance. We need to create safe environments for them, but not entirely free of challenging situations. We need to show them ways that they can begin to take care of themselves by respecting themselves, by standing up for themselves, and by getting help when they need it. We need to be available for support and encouragement. We need to teach them the difference between tattling (which is a strong taboo in the morality of children) and speaking up to protect oneself. None of this happens overnight. It is an ongoing effort that all adults in a child's life contribute to, but it is a critical effort if we want our children to grow up to be strong individuals who can navigate the world of their future. They can be better equipped for their journey into that future because of Climber and because of the conflicts they have faced, and because of all the lessons learned in how to be true to self and the best that relationships can offer. *l&l*

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