

Breaking barriers

My house is a maze of gates and obstacles so complex that the CIA should be stopping by for security tips. I have contrived the perfect geometrical configuration with my ottoman and double stroller to keep Leo from climbing upstairs. There is a complicated system of locks for just about every door in my house, especially the bathrooms and the ones that separate the child-safe world I've created from the scary one on the other side. The gate between the living room and the kitchen is so wide and so tall that my mind has convinced itself that a wall exists where a convenient doorway once stood. But, the poor gate between the dining room and the kitchen was the Dutch boy with his finger in the dam.

Inevitably, the barriers I set to protect my children from the places and things which might hurt them -will break. Leo gained the upper and lower body strength to push that stroller aside -brake or no brake- as though it were his toy train. When a startling silence crept from the toy room where Frank and Leo were playing to the kitchen where I scrubbed a pot of oatmeal, I grew concerned. I went upstairs and found the bathtub running, a towel in the toilet, and my contact lens case in pieces on the floor. (Fortunately, I was wearing them.) And that poor gate, that final fortress that safeguarded my kitchen, laundry room, powder room, storage room, and the door that leads to the great big world - has been reduced to mere child's play. Literally.



I found out the hard way. I locked Leo into his rocking chair and put on Sesame Street. "Mommy's going to take a shower," I told Collin and Frank, whose attention had been arrested by a felt friend with a face. "Be good."

When I returned downstairs, fifteen minutes later, Leo was sound asleep. Frank and Collin were nowhere to be found. So, I followed the sound of the giggles. There they were. Standing on my kitchen counter. Next to the knife block. Fortunately the chef's knife, santuku, parer and all their friends were where I had left them. Unfortunately, the memory card of Frank's baby pictures I had left on the windowsill - was not. (I still haven't found it!)

I shooed them out of the kitchen and scolded Collin for opening the gate for Frank. "But I didn't," he said, "He climbed over the gate himself." I was double mad at Collin for lying until I watched as Frank lunged himself over the hurdle like a runner effortlessly dashing toward his goal. I put him back in the dining room, but once again he forced his way back into the kitchen. When I blocked the gate, he redirected himself to the identical gate in the toy room, which took him right to the

pantry, where he discovered he could finally get snacks for himself. I heard the rustling of the Goldfish package before I even saw him.

The gig was up. My efforts to keep Frank and his crazy Frank antics to one half of the lower level of my home were falling apart as quickly as he was growing. In theory, we were playing a board game -chess, checkers, Risk, Stratego, Battleship...it's all the same - and I lost. But then I thought about it.

· Frank is exploring a world he up until recently knew only as a blur of colors as I escorted him from the back door to his "safe space." He avoids the things with which he has had negative experiences (cat food and litter, for one) and thoroughly investigates the things that light up or make noise (refrigerator, dishwasher, dryer...fortunately, he's accepted my word that the stove is "hot.") The back half of the house is where food comes from. It's the source of mysterious noises: the flush of a toilet, the rattling of the washer, the hum and ding of the microwave. It's the place where Mom spends an inordinate amount of time. Why shouldn't he be there?

· If Frank is intelligent and tenacious enough to thwart my traps, then maybe those character traits will carry on into other aspects of his life. When used properly, such as standing up for what is right and just or even chasing a ball on an athletic field, they can be tremendous strengths.

· Frank's job, and the job of all children, is to test the limits. To gradually detach from us so that they can live independently. This is just another big step in that journey. I pray that God protects him now that he has found his way into the most dangerous part of the house. I pray that God protects him every time his curiosity about the world leads him beyond the fences we've created for him.

The day after Frank set foot upon his brave new world, something awesome happened. I was bringing a load of laundry downstairs when I heard another scuffle in the kitchen. There, I found Frank, climbing the lazy Susan cabinet to get to the counter top. He looked over his shoulder at me and said, "Mommy, I need help." It was the first sentence I ever heard him utter. Another barrier broken. In my excitement and without thinking, I put him on the counter. When I realized what I'd done, I put him back on the ground, hugged him, and told him that he can always ask me for help. There just might be a gate or two along the way.